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Intrigue and Dissent: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins beyond Victorian Norms

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Introduction

Victorian literature acts as a complex and interesting reflection of nineteenth-century British society, a time of great political, social, and cultural changes. The Victorian era, which lasted most of the nineteenth century under Queen Victoria's long reign (1837–1901), was marked by the remarkable growth of the British Empire, by industrial and scientific progress, but also by strong social inequalities, strict gender roles, and worries about the changes that were taking place. While society showed a surface image of order, reason, and respectability – based on a strict middle-class ethic – underneath this surface, deep concerns were present in Victorian culture, including worries about sexuality, madness, crime, gender identity, and the role of women in both public and private life.

Behind the strict and respectable appearance of Victorian morality, there are deep contradictions, unresolved tensions, and repressed desires that often find expression – either openly or in a more hidden form – in the novels of the time. Victorian literature, especially the novel, was not only meant to entertain the growing literate middle class; it became an important tool to question, challenge, and sometimes overturn the dominant values. The novel in particular became a space for symbolic negotiations, where ambiguities, worries, and possibilities of breaking the rules.

This thesis aims to explore the relationship between literature, society, and moral norms in Victorian England, focusing especially on how the novel – and in particular the sensation novel – challenged established values by giving voice to complex, ambiguous, and often deeply controversial female characters. Sensation fiction mixes elements of the gothic, melodrama, mystery, and crime, and often proved effective in revealing the weaknesses of the patriarchal order and in bringing into literature topics that had previously been excluded or censored. The heroines of sensation novels represent desires for independence, forbidden passions and subtle rebellions, exposing deep tensions between appearance and truth, between following social rules and the urgency of desire.

The thesis begins with an exploration of the historical and cultural context of the Victorian era, showing how nineteenth-century British society was marked by a deep tension between modernization and moral conservatism. Industrial and urban growth, the strengthening of the Empire, and scientific progress made British a global power, but at the same time created new forms of anxiety and social insecurity. Beneath an apparent

stability based on middle-class values – order, family, religion, and sobriety – there was a complex reality full of contradictions and weaknesses. Society was built on strict gender and class hierarchies and tended to suppress any behaviour outside the norm, especially toward women, the poor, "deviants," and the sick. Women were idealized as "Angels in the House", but were also closely watched, medicalized, and often silenced. Behind the Victorian public image of respectability were hidden marginal realities – such as prostitution, mental illness, and female desire – that society tried to control and discipline. Understanding this ideological and social background is essential to grasp the role of the novel in Victorian Britain: not only as the main literary form but also as a critical tool able to question the established order and give voice to what society tried to exclude or repress.

The second chapter of the thesis focuses on the central role of the novel in Victorian culture. In an era full of contradictions and changes, the novel becomes especially important in representing and questioning the social, moral, and cultural tensions of nineteenth-century England. Through the development of its narrative forms and themes, the novel reflects the deep changes affecting society, giving voice both to dominant values and to ambiguities and resistances within them. Special attention is given here to the representation of women, who were often confined to marginal and/or idealized roles, but who sometimes expressed, through a kind of "veiled voices" – meaning voices that were concealed under layers of social convention – a hidden discomfort and a subtle critique of patriarchal models. At the same time, the chapter explores sensation fiction, a genre that mixes intrigue, mystery, and social criticism in an innovative and provocative way, showing repressed desires, collective anxieties, and the contradictions of Victorian society. In this way, the novel indeed becomes a laboratory of tensions, subversions, and new narrative possibilities.

The third chapter focuses on the complex and often controversial female characters created by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, a key figure in Victorian sensation literature. This thesis explores through her characters the themes of madness and confinement, issues that reflect the fears and social control practices typical of the time. Braddon skilfully uses her stories to question the moral and social norms that especially limited women's freedom and independence, creating characters that represent a subtle and private form of rebellion against the traditional roles imposed by Victorian society. Special attention is given to the

theme of double identity, which appears in works such as *Lady Audley's Secret* through ambiguous and multi-layered characters who move between false appearances and hidden truths. At the same time, the chapter highlights the strength and determination of characters like *Aurora Floyd,* who, even within restrictive contexts, show courage and resilience. In this way, Braddon's heroines are not just victims or symbols of madness, but active voices in a sharp and meaningful critique of Victorian society, capable of revealing its deepest limits and tensions.

The fourth and final chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the narrative and thematic innovations of Wilkie Collins, a leading author in the world of Victorian sensation novels. Through his works, Collins presents himself as a critical voice able to challenge established social norms, using intrigue and mystery to explore complex issues related to identity, morality, and power. His novels, from *The Woman in White* to *The Moonstone*, show not only technical skill in plot construction and character development, but also a strong focus on social topics that were rarely discussed at the time, such as the role of women, imperial dynamics, and the effects of opium, along with a rare sensitivity toward disability. Through these elements, Collins brings a kind of "silent revolution" in the way differences and marginalized figures are represented, expanding the limits of the Victorian novel and inviting the reader to reflect critically on power structures and the hidden injustices of nineteenth-century society.

Through the detailed analysis of different aspects of Victorian culture and literature, this thesis aims to offer a broad and multi-layered view of a time that was both fascinating and full of contradictions. The goal is to show how literature—especially sensation novels—not only reflects social reality, but becomes a space for negotiation and challenge, where marginal voices and hidden tensions come to the surface and turn into powerful stories. The aim is to leave the reader with a deeper understanding of the complexity of Victorian dynamics, encouraging them to see literature not only as a historical document, but also as a space where resistance, ambiguity, and innovation are explored.

Moreover, through the study of Braddon's controversial female characters and Collins's narrative innovations, this thesis aims to highlight the importance of recognizing the many ways in which nineteenth-century literature questioned and challenged social norms, focusing on issues of identity, gender, exclusion, and power. This work hopes to

leave the reader with a new, thoughtful, and critical perspective—one that recognizes how, even in times that seemed rigid and strictly controlled, literature was able to create spaces for reflection and change that remain meaningful and relevant today.

Chapter 1

Behind the Victorian Curtains: Society, Morality and Literature

1.1. A World in Transformation

The reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) represents one of the most intense eras of transformation in British and global history. In this period Britain moved from being a predominantly agricultural and rural society to an industrial and colonial urban power. The era was marked by changes on all fronts: from technological and economic progress to a revolution in social and moral habits. Victorian society thus tried a balance between innovation and conservation, modernity and tradition, with continuous tensions between social classes, between religion and science. This conflict brought out questions of individual and collective identity, reflected in literary works, social policies and even architecture.[1]

The idea that intellectual progress was the cause of this change was being questioned:

> Human beings are no longer born to their place in life… but are free to employ their faculties, and such favourable chances as offer, to achieve the lot which may appear to them most desirable:[2]

Social structures underwent a profound shift that no longer relied on fixed and immutable hierarchies, reflecting this newfound freedom of choice and aspiration. the breakdown of the old concept of status was partially a result of democratic ideas about human rights, but the main factor was economic. Great inventions dating from the later eighteenth

[1] See A. J. Kingston, *Victorian Era 1837-1901: Rise of the Mothern World,* London, Pastor Publishing Ltd, 2023.
[2] J. Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women,* 4th ed., London, Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1878, p. 31.

century transformed the world in incredible ways, and large-scale production was accelerated in the early decades of the nineteenth century by the introduction of more canals, macadam roads, railways, and steamboats, which allowed for a vast expansion of commerce. This transformation fundamentally reshaped Britain's economic landscape. As time went by, the rigid regulatory system, which reflected the rigidity of social structures, was gradually abandoned in favour of the principle of laissez-faire. By adopting this shift, manufacturers were able to get raw materials at the lowest possible cost, sell their goods at the highest possible price, and employ labour under highly flexible conditions, determining both the duration of employment and wages based on their economic interests.[3]

Living in this dynamic society meant experiencing work pressure that was far beyond anything ever known before. As the railroads and steamships constantly opened new sources of supply and demand, the fight for new markets became intense. Neglecting them could lead to ruin. The breakup of class lines allowed individuals to rise in the world through their own strenuous efforts, and the struggle for success was complemented by the struggle for recognition. Personal ambitions aside, the fact that hundreds of objects that were previously unknown or within the reach of very few became widely available and desirable has led to an increase in expenses and workload.[4]

Improvements were made to the roads to accommodate the growth of transportation to and from the railways. Power-driven machines were introduced for the first time on a large scale, thus fostering a widespread belief in the potential for progress. The building of railways was the greatest physical achievement carried out by the human race within a comparatively short space of time. A work of this kind was likely to touch almost every aspect of the national life.[5]

It was widely believed in Victorian Britain that the employment of children in cotton mills and subsidies paid out of agricultural labourers' rates promoted improvident marriages and large families. These assumptions were not altogether wrong, but they did

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[3] W. E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870,* New Haven, Yale University Press, 1963, p. 5.

[4] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class,* Louisiana, Pelican Publishing Company, 1868, pp. 314-318.

[5] E. Llewellyn Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815-1870,* 2nd ed., Oxford, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962, pp. 38-40.

not account for more than a fraction of the increase. Even in 1830 only about one-eightieth of the people of Great Britain worked in cotton factories. Despite being higher than the first half of the eighteenth century, the number of births per thousand of the population seems to have fallen slightly after 1780-90. It then remained fairly stable until another fall took place after 1830.[6] The decrease in deaths during childhood, early youth, and middle age is due to people being better fed, clothed, more temperate in their habits than before, and less likely to catch diseases like smallpox, which had been endemic in earlier times. These changes, at time undesirable, had an impact on both the towns and the country. It is possible that the increase in the death rate after 1820 was a result of the greater number of people suffering from poor urban conditions, but the expectation of living was still higher than any year in the eighteenth century.[7] The cumulative effect of the new inventions resulted in accelerating the rate of change. The use of coal increased the output of iron; The cost of machinery was reduced by a larger output of iron, and the expense of coal mining was reduced by the use of cheaper machines.

The textile industry witnessed a swift spread of new machines due to technological advancements, which profoundly transformed the way work was done. The first steam-loom in Manchester was set up in 1806, and within twelve years there were about 2,000 steam-driven looms; five years later the number in Great Britain had increased about fivefold, and in 1835 there were about 85,000 power-looms in England, and 15,000 in Scotland.[8] The woollen industry was less central and had a slower pace of change. Steam power was not a significant contributor to the industry until 1830. In addition, there was a growing import of raw cotton. Moreover, the growing richness of the wealthy advanced the way of life of the middle and upper classes to a point where the Victorians had to struggle with issues that previous generations had been able to ignore. Not only the tempo of work but the tempo of living had increased with striking impact, so much so that “the most salient characteristic of life in this latter portion of the nineteenth century is its speed”.[9] Until the Victorian period the rate of locomotion and communication had remained almost what it had been for centuries. The horse and the sailing vessel were still

[6] Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815-1870,* cit., p. 1.
[7] *Idem*, p. 2.
[8] *Idem*, p. 5.
[9] W. R. Greg, "Life at High Pressure", in *Literary and Social Judgments,* London, Trübiner and Co., 1869, pp. 262-288, p. 263.

the fastest things on earth. Within a few years, new railroads increased the speed of travel by land by over 400 percent, and new steamships were maintaining fifteen knots "with wonderful regularity, in spite of wind and tide".[10]

The changes in the character, scope, and extension of schools and universities throughout the United Kingdom between 1815 and 1870 might well be taken as the central feature of the age of reform. These changes, which affected the manners, outlook, and capacity of every class in society, were part of the general movement towards a higher standard of life. Educational reformers pursued the advancement of society, recognizing that new schools were as indispensable to progress as modern machine tools and railways.[11] In 1815 the most common method of education in Great Britain, and in many other European countries, was: the elder children in a school taught the younger children. The plan had certain advantages. It was cheap; the cost of education for one person was reduced to seven shillings per year. However, more enlightened and progressive conceptions of education existed, such as the instruction of children within their own homes. Their education before entering school was considered one of the most significant means of enhancing the educational standards of public schools. The Reform Bill of 1867 marked a fundamental shift in the social and educational policies of the United Kingdom, making the education of the masses an urgent and pressing issue. The law focused primarily on children under the age of thirteen, but its impact was not immediately universal, as it remained limited in its provisions. While it had the merit of introducing a more accessible education system, it did not provide free education for all. In fact, the law stipulated that only parents who could not afford to pay the school fees were excused from the costs, leaving a portion of the population without actual access to education unless they were in particularly difficult financial circumstances. Although innovative for its time, this approach did not completely resolve the social disparities in access to education.[12]

On the other hand, there was a significant increase in the pace of social, economic, and political change, leading to greater stir and movement across all areas of public life.

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[10] See M. Morgan, "The Meaning and Mechanics of Travel in the Victorian Age", in *National Identities and Travel in Victorian Britain,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, p. 28.
[11] Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815-1870,* cit., p.474.
[12] See F. H., Herrick, "The Reform Bill of 1867 and the British Party System", *Pacific Historical Review,* vol. 3, no.2, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1934, pp. 216-233, pp. 220-224.

This phenomenon was not limited to one particular sector, but spread across various aspects of society, from politics to economics and even culture. The speed of these transformations was accelerated by the growing influence of a more rational and scientific approach to managing affairs. The causes of this faster pace of change can be summed up, roughly, by the concept of "rational and purposive control". This type of control relied on the application of precise methods such as measurements, counts, and systematic observations to make informed decisions. The idea was to introduce a management system for resources and policies that was more efficient and less influenced by emotional or random factors, instead based on concrete data and rigorous analysis. Scientific thinking and the use of statistics led to a transformation in many sectors, including industry and bureaucracy, encouraging more organized management and central control, which became a distinctive feature of periods of rapid modernization. This new paradigm, which was intended for greater control and long-term planning, was adopted by not only politics, but also economics, social management, and education.[13]

The Victorians were captivated by not just the mechanical speed of the new inventions, but also the speed of life they created. The rapidity at which goods, letters, and people are transported has simply increased the number of things one can fit into a day and the rush from one to another. In the past people did not run about the town or the land as Victorians do. Earlier generations travelled less often, did not hurry to catch trains, wrote one letter a morning instead of ten.

The perception of living faster and in more crowded conditions has both an intellectual and mechanical foundation. The spread of education, along with the massive expansion of knowledge, and the subsequent increase in publication, books, periodicals, and newspapers, has given every man a hundred means of rational occupation and amusement which were closed to those who came before.

The advancements made in the physical and biological sciences became increasingly important during the nineteenth century. If society had not valued freedom of thought, scientific investigation would not have progressed so quickly and might never have progressed at all. It may be said that in the investigation of nature, scientists are using methods that are similar to those used by manufacturers and businessmen in industry and commerce; in other words, methods for making rational calculations and

[13] Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815-1870,* cit., p.39.

measurements that do not rely on past habits or traditions. The use of applied science was a key factor in the country's economic development. The challenges of government and administration could be significantly affected by a better understanding of the laws that govern life and matter. These effects not only contributed to improving public health or lowering the costs of comfort and amenities, but they also strengthened the concept of progress. In the eighteenth century, this notion was mostly based on faith in human reasoning, instead of concrete evidence.[14]

During the nineteenth century, there was a growing confidence in humanity's ability to comprehend and change the world through the application of reason and empirical observation, which led to rapid advancements in the physical and biological sciences. Through an in-depth collection of evidence, Charles Darwin challenged traditional conceptions about the nature and origin of species thanks to this intellectual climate, which promoted freedom of thought and scientific inquiry**.**

On the advice of scientists he knew at Cambridge, he started studying botany and geology, and found that in both fields, ideas about the nature and history of species were imperfect. Already in 1837 Darwin had begun to consider the 'laws of change' affecting species. In the struggle for existence, favourable circumstances would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result would be the formation of new species. Darwin worked for twenty years on the hypothesis that certain traits had 'survival value' and that these traits spread through the elimination of organisms that did not possess them. In November 1859 Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin's book was important because it accumulated a large amount of evidence from every region and examined it with insight.

The theory of natural selection is built upon a few fundamental principles, the first of which is nature's immense genetic diversity ensures that no two individuals are ever exactly the same or possess the exact same level of adaptability to specific environmental conditions at any given time. The second principle is that the probability of survival, reproduction, and transmitting their attributes to the next generation is higher for those who are best adapted. The third key principle is that, in this manner, populations can

[14] Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815-1870,* cit., p. 563.

continuously adjust to the changes in their environments; this is the explanation for the endless variety of adaptations of animals and plants to each other and inanimate nature.[15]

The universal acceptance of certain ideas during the mid-nineteenth century stood in contrast to Darwin's theory of natural selection. Among its critics were the physico-theologians,[16] who saw the world's harmony and complexity as unquestionable evidence of divine creation. These physico-theologians believed that God had meticulously designed nature and endowed it with specific rules to maintain its perfect order. Almost all of Darwin's teachers and colleagues in England were natural theologians. A second group of opponents were the teleologists from the Greeks to Kant and K.E. von Baer, who argued that nature was not static but progressing towards an ever-greater state of perfection.[17] They believed that some intrinsic force, divine intervention or natural law was guiding the world toward increasing harmony. While there were teleologists who attributed this guiding force to God, others believed it was an inherent principle of nature.[18]

The adherents to these ideas felt attacked by Darwin. The argument in most cases did not concern the validity of the facts used by Darwin to support his theories, but with their interpretation, and even though their basic sphere of relevance was outside of science, certain ideologies had a significant influence in this regard. The development of science during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries resulted in an intense interest in all aspects of nature, which was considered God's creation. The existence of a creator was proven by two features of nature: the marvellous adaptations of animals and plants to each other and inanimate nature, and the laws of nature, which beautifully regulated all processes in nature.

Natural theology was particularly strong in England; although the natural theology of the eighteenth century was no longer accepted on the continent, arguments based on natural theology were still widely used during Darwin's time. The deists explained that God had not only created the world but had also endowed it with laws, which regulate everything that occurs in the world. And these laws would lead the world to ever-greater

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[15] *Idem,* pp. 468-469.
[16] E. Mayr. "The Ideological Resistance to Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society,* vol. 135, no.2, 1991, pp. 123-139, p.125, JSTOR, Accessed 17/03/2025.
[17] *Ibidem.*
[18] *Idem*, p. 126.

perfection. All this was now questioned by Darwinism. Darwin's position was to consider the individual as the real target of selection, because it is always an individual that succeeds or fails in the struggle for survival and reproduction. Natural selection is concerned with everything that enhances survival chances, such as better resource utilization, better adaptation to weather and climate, better disease resistance, and greater ability to fight enemies. It is surprising that philosophers in the nineteenth century did not immediately recognize that Darwin was developing a new philosophy of science, one that was completely different from the traditional ones. In classical philosophy of science, experiments were the only accepted way to validate a theory. However, Darwin's work demonstrated that direct experiments were not sufficient for all scientific fields, particularly those that involve complex phenomena such as evolution. It is widely known that practical experiments are not always possible in many areas of science. In these situations, especially in the sciences such as evolutionary biology, geology, and meteorology, observation and comparison have become fundamental methods of science. The use of these approaches has resulted in new paths in scientific research, emphasizing that careful observation and comparative analysis are equally essential in the process of scientific discovery as direct experimentation.[19]

1.2. Norms and Contradictions

This shift in the scientific method reflected broader transformations in nineteenth-century society, where traditional conventions, including social and religious norms, were also undergoing significant changes. Social conformity was a kind of sincere insincerity. People adopted the conventions because from long training and habit they themselves were conventional. One of the leading proprieties was religious conformity. Attending church was essential for a person to be considered respectable, and full social acceptance was closely linked to membership in the Church of England. Faith was not the only factor, habits and upbringing also played a crucial role in shaping individual behaviour and social norms. During this period, the conservative nature of the British and their attachment to tradition and custom were reinforced by a fearful reaction to radical change. As a result,

[19] W. E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870,* cit., pp. 100-102.

a lot of people kept repeating the familiar beliefs and expressions that they had learned in childhood, without fully realizing that they no longer had true belief in them. The right thing to do was not limited to what an individual *wanted* to do to be a good citizen or what they did out of habit; in order to avoid social stigma, it was also what he or she *had to* do.[20]

The Victorian middle class was ridden by fear: fear of radical politics threatened the bourgeois state of 1832; fear of atheism because it could undermine the moral sanctions on which society relied; feared the sensuality because it menaced the family. In order to maintain its convictions, it utilized the full force of social stigma and exclusion against any real or imagined departure from political, moral, or religious orthodoxy.[21] The genuine adherence to a profession of faith was often quietly mirrored by a more superficial, reticent conformity. As the years went by, many Victorian churches continued to be filled with men who, despite their regular participation in religious services, no longer truly believed the prayers they recited or the doctrines they professed. Their involvement in church life was based more on social obligation than inner conviction: they believed that the church was a vital part of family order and community stability, and it should be supported for the greater good instead of solely based on personal faith. However, this duty became a burden for many. Religious ceremonies were often accompanied by discomfort or even a sense of hypocrisy. They found themselves reciting words that they did not truly believe in, performing a show of devotion that did not align with their inner feelings. This led to a gap between their public appearance and who they really were inside. Yet in a society where religion was closely tied to notions of respectability, honour, and social standing, few felt free to openly distance themselves from it. Thus, for many, church attendance became more of a habit than a heartfelt choice. It became a quiet discipline enforced to maintain the appearance of moral cohesion, even at the cost of personal authenticity. Victorians lived in a time when moral standards were set extremely high – often too high for human nature. Attending church and demonstrating values like seriousness, enthusiasm, and sexual purity were expected of men as proof of their faith. This resulted in a noticeable gap between what people claimed to believe and how they actually lived. The contrast between Sunday and Monday showed a significant

[20] See T. B. Macaulay, *History of England,* London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988.
[21] W. E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870,* cit., p. 397.

gap between moral principles and everyday actions, which revealed the hypocrisy that was pervasive in modern English life. On Sundays, the same person who spent his/her time as a devoted Christian, passionately supporting the Church, charity, and religious missions, would become a ruthless businessman on Monday, driven by self-interest and competition, with no regard for others. Victorians exemplified hypocrisy by professing devotion to one God while truly serving another. In the emerging middle class, there were often excess virtue and morality displayed as a result of a dual nature of social conformity caused by religious duty and the fear of deviating from norms. Their fear forced them to maintain the appearance of sincere faith, resulting in imposed moral rigidity and the need for censorship to maintain respectability at all costs. The excessive display of piety and virtue often took a specific form during this period. Although they wanted to look respectable, the emerging middle class was too insecure to try anything too risky, so they avoided anything that could be considered vulgar. At the same time, Evangelicalism and the fear of sensuality led to strict censorship.[22]

All forms of self-deception involve some level of evasion. Evasion is a process of deliberately ignoring whatever was unpleasant and pretending it did not exist. This led to a greater lack of sincerity in pretending that the happy view of things was the full truth. In the case of religion, the desire to adhere to Christianity or be perceived as the perfect Christian, along with the fear of doubts or negative thoughts, leads to a pressure to present oneself in a virtuous way. This pressure makes honest self-reflection difficult, as people may avoid facing uncomfortable truths about themselves. In other words "self-deception happens when individuals refuse to acknowledge their doubts or flaws and instead prefer to maintain an idealized image of themselves."[23]

For the Victorians, facts related to sex were primarily disagreeable, while the most terrifying truth concerned the state of religion. But there were other harsh realities that could not be ignored, such as the suffering of the poor and the darker sides of human nature. These were not just hidden out of fear – though that played a part – but also because of a stubborn, superficial optimism that preferred illusions over reality. The Victorians inherited the Romantics' idealized and sentimental view of human nature,

[22] See D. Nash, "Reassessing the 'Crisis of Faith' in the Victorian Age: Eclecticism and the Spirit of Moral Inquiry", *Journal of Victorian Culture,* vol. 16, 2011, pp. 65-82.
[23] W. E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870,* cit., p. 413.

which led to another form of evasion, a different kind of optimism. The Romantics' renewed enthusiasm for humanity was the source of this optimism, which was fundamentally opposed to critical or pessimistic perspectives. As a result, shaped by their inherited faith in human nature, the Victorians tended to dismiss darker or more sceptical perspective on reality. Of all the Victorians attitudes none was so often attacked by the Victorians themselves as hypocrisy.

In Victorian society, outward conformity to accepted norms was seen as essential to the point that appearances often mattered more than genuine conviction. Maintaining composure, self-control, and public propriety was viewed as a duty, resulting in an ideal of respectability that people were expected to exhibit – at least on the surface. Despite breaking moral rules privately, there was no intention to challenge them in public. In fact, every effort was made to maintain the appearance of integrity. Transgressions were carefully hidden; it was important not to be faultless, but to maintain the innocence appearance. The value of reputation was both fragile and important, and society did not forgive those who let their masks slip. In this context, good manners were more than just politeness - they were instruments of social harmony. Etiquette and self-control were used to cover up conflicts, vulnerability, and deviation from the norm. By observing these external forms, a sense of order was established, and a silent language was understood and respected by everyone. The reason was not just convenience, but rather a sense of loyalty to a shared ideal of civilization and decorum. Those who failed to live up to the accepted moral standards did not openly call themselves rebels. Publicly, they continued to adhere to the very values they privately betrayed, and in doing so, helped reinforce them. Hypocrisy, in this sense, was not only a personal weakness, but also a collective mechanism that society used to maintain its image and avoided confronting its own contradictions.[24]

This emphasis on outward respectability extended to gender roles as well, shaping expectations for women in both literature and society, where significant disparities were evident. In Victorian literature and society, women were adored, protected, and persecuted, and their purity, innocence, and maternal instincts were used to inspire both paintings and writings. Although it was evolving during the nineteenth century, the

[24] See W. A. Madden, "Victorian Morality: Ethics not Mysterious", *The Review of Politics,* 1961, pp. 458-471.

conventional Victorian 'vision of womanhood' was still primarily concerned with marriage and the family. Moral and home qualities were demanded of women. Before being married, girls were supposed to be pure. Working class women, middle class women, and higher-class women must be defined since women's lives varied according to class.

Women in the middle and upper classes were not extremely active. They spent most of their time at home, training their staff and engaging in music, drawing and needlework. In the late nineteenth century, middle-class women had to work for a living as well. They thus made every effort to choose compatible partners "in order to avoid such a tragedy".[25] It was said that women were better suited for 'the domestic environment'. In contrast, men were said to be more suited for active lives, better vocations, and public life. Women had very little spare time in households with just one servant. The lady was obligated to complete the rest of the chores and take care of her children, while the servant took care of the most difficult and unsanitary tasks. Upper- and middle-class women had to spend most of their time at home because if they were seen alone on the streets, people would assume they were prostitutes or lower-class workers.

The life of working-class women was more challenging. Due to their long hours and responsibilities at home, their existence involved more than just upholding domestic norms. They often worked side by side with men in factories, workhouses, or fields while earning less money. As a consequence, their house was never as orderly and comfortable as the middle-class home, and women were always in charge of it. Women were subordinate to males regardless of class: in the patriarchal Victorian family system they were mainly involved in domestic work and raising children due to their limited status or privileges.[26]

This perception of women's roles was further reinforced by scientific beliefs of the time such as those promoted by Cesare Lombroso, who portrayed women as naturally weaker and less intellectually capable than man. According to Lombroso's theories, men were considered taller, heavier, and stronger than women; they also had more defined

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[25] V. Whig, "Victorian Society and Gender Stereotypes", in T. Horton and N. Anand, *Characteristics of English Literature in Victorian Era,* Delhi, Dominant Publishers and Distributors Pvt Ltd, 2008, pp. 105-112, p. 105.

[26] See E. O. Hellerstein (ed.), *A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France and the United States,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981.

shoulders and more visible muscles. Their voices sounded different and had a stronger tone, and their bodies, particularly their faces, were hairier. Men were seen to have a greater capacity for ingenuity than women, and were more daring, brash, and active. Without a doubt, the intellect was considered greater. That man was considered stronger, more productive and more powerful. At times, he might have been selfish due to his ambition. In general, men were also seen as smarter than women. Women, on the other hand, were seen to be more attractive.[27]

In this context, the development of psychiatry during the Victorian age, as a new field seeking to define and control the unconscious mind, further solidified these gendered beliefs by framing women's perceived intellectual and physical interiority as part of a broader, supposedly scientific understanding of human nature. According to Oxford English Dictionary, psychiatry is "the branch of medicine concerned with the causes, diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of mental illness"[28], was a creation of the Victorian age, when many new medical theories emerged and helped shape society's ideas about how people could control or manage their mental process. In Victorian times, inexplicable murders, social rebellions, and gendered requests were often explained and justified through the use of insanity, which has been investigated for a long time. Madness and its subsequent acts of delirium have not only ignited a deep and intense curiosity in society, but they have also been closely observed and studied. Sigmund Freud, one of the most important pioneers in the study of insanity, came up with a definition for what he commonly referred to as *hysteria*: according to him, this condition was caused by the alteration of mental faculties either permanently or temporarily; in fact, as Freud argued,

> these attacks are nothing, but phantasies projected and translated into motor activity and represented in pantomime. It is also true that these phantasies are unconscious but otherwise they are of the same nature as those that may be observed directly in daydreams or revealed by an interpretation of nocturnal dreams.[29]

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[27] C. Lombroso, G. Ferrero, *The Female Offender,* New York, D. Appleton and Company, 1897, pp. 93-96.
[28] "Psychiatry", *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1347331619 > Accessed 22 June 2025.
[29] S. Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, New York, Touchstone, 1997, p. 120.

Metaphorically speaking, according to medical thinkers such as Sir Daniel Noble (1810-1885), and, earlier Paolo Zacchia (1584-1689) considered one of the founders of European legal medicine and a jurist who brought major changes to the legal treatment of mental illness, madness might be compared to a gloomy and foggy landscape, to mental opacity and blindness, to a darkened room, where light and reason are shut out, and the mind is overwhelmed by confusion. It is not surprising that insanity and contagiousness are often linked in the history of madness. Until the final decades of the nineteenth century, insanity was perceived as a stigma passed down through generations, with the idea that mental illness could be inherited becoming a key concern when discussing the dangers posed by mental disorders during the Victorian era.

The role of "hysteria" in Victorian times was crucial, as it was conceived as a gendered pathology used to deny legal rights and remove faculties. Hysteria – from the Greek word *uterus* – was commonly understood as the inability or incapacity to control movements, sensations, and desires. Women were physically more likely to be classified as hysterical than men due to their more intense emotions and sensitivity. Since Greek times, at least, the female body has been viewed as the intersection of emotions and inner movements, which are primarily caused and influenced by the womb. Women were believed to be more susceptible to nervous illnesses because of their fragile mind and, more specifically, their organism. Madness resulted in women and men being placed on different social levels; men were responsible for managing and controlling their lunacy. The perception that women are perfect examples of mental fragility and defenceless stupidity is on the rise. It was evident that their nature was opposed to male supremacy.[30]

This perception of women as naturally prone to madness led to the development of a pseudo-medical branch: phrenology. In 1796, Professor Franz Joseph Gall was teaching cranioscopy in Germany, and he established a strong professional relationship with his collaborator, Johann Gasper Spurzheim (1776-1832), who coined the term 'phrenology'. In the following years, both were credited with spreading many theories throughout Europe, advocating the notion that the skull's shape could provide valuable insights into a person's character.[31] This area of medical study was so significant in the nineteenth

[30] See A. Scull, *Hysteria: The Biography,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 30-35.
[31] A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization: A Cultural History of Insanity, from the Bible to Freud, from the Madhouse to Modern Medicine,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 214.

century that numerous theorists, including Lombroso, wrote volumes and volumes that promoted ideas about human behaviour based on the skull's shape.

> Theoretically, phrenology provided a clear physiological explanation of the operations of the brain, one that permitted a unified account of normal as well as abnormal mental functioning.[32]

The rapid advancement of numerous scientific and pseudo-scientific discoveries in medicine, both in Britain and throughout Europe, had a crucial impact on changing how patients with insanity were treated. During this period, physicians were firmly convinced that mental illness was a condition that could easily be cured. Their belief was that, by using various drugs and various treatments, including physical therapies and moral management, they could help restore the affected individuals to health. This growing body of medical knowledge led to a sense of optimism, as practitioners saw these advancements as key to alleviating mental disorders and improving the well-being of those afflicted. Madness had been confined, isolated, abandoned, and hidden in madhouses, prisons, and workhouses in the previous centuries, but the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had different intentions. Physicians and therapists started investigating new models and ways to cure or, at least, limit madness. Many physicians, including figures such as Philippe Pinel and Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol – both pioneers in modern psychiatry known for advocating humane treatment of the mentally ill and for their efforts to reform asylums – travelled across Europe by either riding carriages or embarking on journeys to collect information about the innovations and discoveries of their colleagues. Institutions for mad people were presented as necessary to keep social order. These institutions not only maintained social order but also reinforced the idea that madness could be inherited.[33]

The concept of hereditary insanity became really important especially in Victorian time when fears of women – with their apparently innate insanity and the possible infection of the offspring – turned into a nightmarish preoccupation. “Victorian and Edwardian assumptions about the nerves temperament in fact depended heavily on

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[32] *Idem,* p. 216.

[33] See M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason,* New York, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1988, pp. 57-58.

heredity".[34] The commonly shared idea of women's inferiority at that time is confirmed by all these discourses and theories.

Asylums undoubtedly played a crucial role in the Victorian age and their existence actually demonstrated that insanity had to be kept distant from public and private places. It was believed that insanity was biologically transmissible by the majority of people, and asylums were built to stop its contagious spread. Seen from the outside, Victorian asylums may be perceived as wonderful buildings, with separate sections for both men and women, large windows, large wards, and a large garden for peaceful walks and stunning views of flowers, bushes, and trees. In addition, in Victorian asylums, a kind staff was generally expected to accompany the patient through his or her deliriums and the medical treatment would be followed by various kinds of entertainment: apparently, patients might find comfort in leisure activities such as reading, riding, fishing, sewing, drawing, and playing instruments.[35] In several cases, instead, the asylum, initially presented as a welcoming place, could become a nightmarish detention place, an impassable road, with no way out. Confinement was a mere act of abandoning the patient to her/his delirium and delusions, often accompanied by beatings, and in the presence of fleas and rats. In asylums, some tools, such as the waist stretch, head tools, and other restraining instruments, were used until the 1950s and 1960s, when new treatments began to be tested and introduced. Among them were chains, restraining collars, and various other instruments designed to control and immobilize patients. Although going to a mental asylum might have seemed like a better alternative to being sent to prison, in reality, it was no less restrictive or harsh. In many cases, asylums were places of suffering, where patients were subjected to inhumane conditions and treatments, offering little hope for recovery or improvement.[36]

In the latter part of the Victorian period, women's position began to progress. The *Matrimonial Causes Act* of 1857 made it easier to get a divorce, even though it was challenging to collect sufficient evidence to support a woman's claim against her husband. Divorce was still costly and painful. Women could not file for divorce due to their

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[34] J. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves: Doctors, Patients and Depression in Victorian England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 89.
[35] M. Stevens, *Life in the Victorian Asylum: The World of the Nineteenth Century Health Care*, Barnsley, South Yorkshire, Pen & Sword Books Ltd., 2014, p. 5.
[36] See R. Porter, *Madness: A Brief History,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 99.

husband's infidelity, but men could. In fact, while a husband could file for divorce solely on the grounds of his wife infidelity, a woman had to prove her husband's infidelity along with another reason, such as cruelty abandonment, or even crimes like incest or bestiality. During this period, tyranny was often seen as a valid reason for divorce, but even with the adoption of the new *Divorce Act* in 1878, the process was still difficult. Although the law provided a legal pathway for individuals to escape abusive marriages, the reality was that it was still incredibly difficult to rebuild one's life after such an escape. Surviving and reintegrating into society was a complex and often isolating struggle due to social stigma, financial instability, and the emotional toll of leaving an oppressive relationship. Preconceptions and gender stereotypes about men's superiority were prevalent during the Victorian period, which made it difficult for women in general. Women were still perceived as inferior to men even at the beginning of the 20th century, but they gained more rights and developed into more powerful individuals.[37]

1.3. Literary Innovations: Emerging Forms and Genres

The transformations experienced in society soon found a significant echo in the new artistic and literary forms that were emerging. The cultural and literary landscape was profoundly shaped by the social and legal evolution during the Victorian era, which also shaped people's private lives. Despite everyday struggles, like divorce and its consequences, continuing to shape society, significant changes were about to leave a lasting impression on the artistic and literary scene. The Reform Bill of 1832 marks the beginning of a new artistic era despite the danger of setting precise boundaries for literary movements or linking literature too closely to political and economic changes of an era. The first thirty years of the century saw poetry producing some of the finest works in English literature; however, from 1832 to 1870, the most outstanding works were written in prose. The majority of English prose during the mid-century was the novel, which was primarily written for entertainment but frequently featured critiques of social injustices.[38]

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[37] V. Whig, "Victorian Society and Gender Stereotypes", in Tim Horton, Neha Anand, *Characteristics of English Literature in Victorian Era,* cit., p. 106.
[38] Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815-1870,* cit., p. 529.

The term "Victorian" is a highly useful adjective for the literature of this period, as the dominant beliefs and attitudes of a society always influence its artistic expression.

Prose became increasingly defined by novelists addressing social critique and the complexities of modern life, in an era when poetry lost its dominant position. This change involved not just literary forms, but also a reflection of broader societal changes. Industrialization, urbanization, and scientific advancements shaped the intellectual and cultural landscape, leading to the novel to take centre stage as the main form of literary expression. It was the perfect medium for its time because it could capture the complexity of modern life, addressing urgent social issues, and so engage a rapidly-expanding readership. Consequently, while poetry continued to hold artistic and intellectual value, it no longer occupied the central role it had enjoyed in earlier decades, as prose became the primary vehicle for storytelling, social critique, and philosophical exploration. Compared to the previous decade, the 1810s saw a significant decline in literary production of novels, partly due to a reaction against what was considered "low" narratives during a more austere period, but also due to material factors such as the high cost of paper and a substantial reduction in the publication of foreign works, particularly translations of international authors. In contrast, the early 1820s saw a period of expansion, which culminated in 1824 with the publication of almost one hundred new titles. It appeared that publishing's return was a direct response to the previous years' struggles, with renewed enthusiasm for literature and a greater willingness to explore the works of both local and foreign authors. Thanks to increased resource availability and cultural preferences that favour more varied and accessible production, the publishing industry started to recover. The year 1824 was a significant milestone, as it reflected the increase in publishing during an era that seemed to have overcome the economic and cultural challenges of the previous years.[39] The literary period in question saw the novel rise from a marginal genre to one of respectability and eventually literary prominence. The new awareness of literary history was facilitated by new kinds of books that included novel-writing and novel-reading in a wider history of English literature during this period. The novel gained prestige not only because of its development, but also because of works that

[39] P. Garside, "The Early 19th–Century English Novel, 1820-1836", in L. Rodensky (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 21- 40, p. 26.

contextualized it within the larger literary tradition.[40] This shift in literary history was largely driven by the rise of a nation of readers. It was part of a broader expansion of reading materials – made possible by the industrialization of printing – and an increase in the number of readers. In particular, a growing segment of the population, whether due to choice or economic necessity, has restricted their reading to works in English.

During the Victorian era, significant changes occurred in the perception of literary history in Britain. The expected and widespread reading activity among Britons caused literary historians to shift their focus. They started to see fiction as not only a component of a wider global literary tradition, but also as a reflection of the nation's monolingual reading habits. The nineteenth century marked a pivotal transition in British narrative, which moved from a pan-European tradition to a distinctly English form. The growing emphasis on national culture and English literary identity led to a reinterpretation of narrative, which became increasingly linked to the evolution of British history and the dynamics of social modernization. During this period, narrative evolved from a literary product that was changing in European contexts to a British portrayal of national character that reflected the political, social, and economic nuances of England. As the country progressed and defined itself, people began to consider literature as a crucial part of its progress. The increasing importance of English narrative, both as a literary form and a means of shaping national consciousness, represented a clear break from the past and established a literary history that saw England as the core of cultural production.[41]

So, according to Victorian literary historians, despite its various forms, the novel's significance in the nineteenth century was by then firmly established as a crucial aspect of literary history. Victorian novels are commonly considered the most typical and widely defining voices of nineteenth century literature; the literary genre that defined the era.

At the same time, reading novels was often criticized by moralists, religious leaders, and conservative thinkers, who feared it could have harmful effects – particularly on young women's morals – and saw novel reading a threat to traditional values. It was considered a potentially harmful activity, capable of producing a range of deleterious effects, particularly in the moral sphere. These texts could indeed function as a kind of

[40] W. Mckelvy, "New Histories of English Literature and the Rise of the Novel, 1835-1859", in L. Rodensky (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 41-64*,* p. 44.
[41] *Idem,* pp. 45-46.

"literary opium, that lulls every sense into delicious rapture", offering a seductive escape from the constraints of everyday life. However, they also "contributed more than any other cause to debauch the morals of the young fair sex".[42] In a society that was influenced by patriarchal ideals and a rigidly moralistic worldview, female readers were considered especially susceptible to the destabilizing effects of literature. It was generally believed that young women were influenced by sentimental and sometimes transgressive narratives in novels, which could trigger inappropriate emotions and desires, and lead them to question the social, familial, and religious norms they were supposed to adhere to. The act of reading novels on their own was perceived as a way to gain inner freedom that was not under the control of men and was seen as a threat to the current social order. The danger is not just about fantasy or emotional overindulgence, but also about the intellectual awakening that books can provoke, which may motivate women to take more active roles in society and culture. In this sense, novels were viewed as both morally subversive and potentially emancipatory, which led many conservative circles to resist them.[43]

This negative perception went even further: in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, novel-writing was described by literary critics, and some male intellectuals of the time, as a kind of 'prostitution' of literary talent. In other words, they saw it as a shameful misuse of a writer's abilities, which reduced the status of both the author and the literary form itself.[44] Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, these views remained firmly established and were endorsed by numerous critics, including religious dissidents, utilitarian thinkers, politicians, and even some writers. Even with their ideological differences, these groups had a shared concern that the popularity of novels was undermining the traditional values and standards of serious literature.

The concern that readers were not reflective enough and the question of how novels could foster or counter these tendencies went beyond these expressions of anxiety about certain groups of readers. The novel readers' inability to engage in their own thinking was

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[42] See Anonymous, "An Essay on the Modern Novel", *The Annual Register: A View of the History, Politics, and Literature, for the Year 1772,* 5th ed. London, J. Dodsley, 1795, pp. 184-188.

[43] See J. I. Cope, "An Early Analysis of the 'Victorian Age' in Literature", *Modern Language Notes,* vol. 71, no.1, 1956, pp. 14-17, pp. 15-16, JSTOR, 19/03/2025.

[44] See M. Joseph, "Authorship: The Development and Legitimation of a Literary Profession", in *Victorian Literary Business: The Management and Practices of the British Publishing Industry,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 60-67.

a reflection of a more widespread sociological condition, which was the feeling that many Victorians believed they were living in an unreflective and materialistic era. Reading itself was not the problem, but it became so when it was practiced in a way that replaced independent thinking. The fear was that an abundance of books could lead to living too much through others and not enough through oneself. Constantly viewing the world through someone else's perspective was seen as unproductive.[45] In Victorian periodicals, critics frequently complained about the mental numbness of reading novels, particularly when it comes to popular 'sensation novels' that were believed to entertain readers on a visceral level. While Victorians generally agreed that imagination, spirituality, and humanity were at risk in an increasingly industrialized world, not everyone saw novels as the cause or exacerbation of this cognitive erosion. In this period, the concept of genre became increasingly important in relation to the novel. As the form was evolving, pushing writers to define its parameters and typologies more clearly, the word ‘genre’ was also emerging in English. Borrowed from French, where it means ‘type’ or ‘sort’, it was only gradually applied to literary categories and increasingly used in discussions about the novel, helping to refine the way different types of literature were understood.[46]

A number of well-known factors contributed to a dramatic increase in the production and accessibility of reading material of every sort, particularly periodicals and newspapers during Queen Victoria's reign. Several innovations in publishing and book distribution that found great success during the middle of the nineteenth century also helped to integrate novels fluidity into everyday life. Even though they were separate innovations, the growth of the circulating library, railway bookstall, and serial publication all contributed to a dynamic in which novels were frequently moving physically and mentally into and out of readers' daily lives – books were both physically accessible and mentally omnipresent, influencing daily routines and conversations. The high cost of books meant that, from the eighteenth century onward, an increasing number of readers paid an annual fee to borrow their books from subscription libraries instead of buying them. Moreover, publication in parts, meant that a good deal of contemporary fiction was designed with a cyclical reading experience in mind. The economic appeal of reading a

[45] D. Gettelman, “The Victorian Novel and its Readers”, in L. Rodensky (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 111-128, p. 122.
[46] R. E. Newman, “Genre, Criticism, and the Early Victorian Novel”, in L. Rodensky (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 65-86, p. 67

story in serially published instalments was, of course, that it required less outlay up front; "Many will pay 5s. at a time who will not pay 30s. at once".[47] Victorian readers preferred this form because it resonated with their ethos of gradual, continual, and uniform progress and development.

Until the late 1850s, Victorian novels were initially released either as individually-bound volumes (usually in one-, three-, or occasionally two-volume formats) or as separate monthly publications. The popularity of these partial publications declined in the early 1860s, and was replaced by the less risky initial magazine serialization, with a few to several chapters of the novel appearing in every weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly issue. The placement of regular novel instalments within the pages of a print publication that already had a certain circulation made selling fiction seem less risky for both the author and the publisher. Magazines thus enabled authors to reach an already established readership, guaranteeing a certain level of circulation for their novels and raising their visibility in the literary marketplace. A popular novel, in turn, had the potential not only to boost the magazine's overall sales but also to significantly enhance the cultural prestige of the publisher. This prestige was often closely tied to the magazine itself, which frequently bore the publisher's name – as exemplified by *Macmillan's Magazine* or *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. These publications acted as powerful branding tools, strengthened the identity and reputation of the publishing house. In many cases, publishers often used their in-house magazines to introduce emerging novelists, offering them a valuable entry point into the literary field.[48]

The circulation of periodicals and serial publications in and out of readers' daily, weekly, or monthly routines became an integral part of their lived experience. Readers had the opportunity to both anticipate the continuation of a story and reflect, discuss, and immerse themselves in multiple fictional worlds during the intervals between instalments. Through this temporal rhythm, literature was able to intertwine with everyday life, allowing readers to simultaneously engage with both fictional narratives and their personal realities. Serially published novels were known for their ability to build and maintain suspense while unfolding the narrative. For realist authors, however, suspense

[47] D. Gettelman, "The Victorian Novel and its Readers", cit., p. 116.
[48] See S. D. Bernstein, "Short Forms: Serialization and Short Fiction", in D. Denisoff, T. Schaffer (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Victorian Literature,* London, Routledge, 2019, pp. 33-37.

served a deeper purpose: it taught readers not to make immediate judgments and to inhabit narrative pauses with speculation rather than rush to definitive conclusions.[49] Active engagement was promoted by these gaps, which encouraged readers to imagine possibilities and question appearances. In doing so, realist fiction cultivated habits of critical thinking and scepticism – skills that readers often carried beyond the page and into their everyday lives.[50] Novels were also present in the Victorian public consciousness through debate and controversy regarding the accessibility of fiction across all classes of Victorian life, especially in relation to the rise of free libraries, which made literature more available to a wider audience and led to discussions about who should have had access to reading material and the potential impact it would have had on society. Overall, due to new publishing formats, new markets, and new forms of distribution, books became less prohibitively expensive over the course of the nineteenth century, and thus more easily accessible; this accessibility was also partly the result of the 1850 *Public Libraries Act*, which enabled free access to all as part of an effort "to make good books available to all".[51]

As with successful part-publications, a well-received serialization was typically followed by a bound-volume edition designed for use in subscription or circulating libraries. This initial republication often marked only the beginning of a novel's extended life in print. Over time, the work would frequently appear in a succession of increasingly affordable formats – cheap editions, reprints, and mass-market versions – that contributed to a sustained and widespread presence in the literary marketplace. This process ensured not only a kind of cultural 'omnipresence' for the most popular novelists of the period, but also a prolonged period of readership and influence, far exceeding what is usually suggested by book history's traditional emphasis on first editions alone. One downside of the 'to be continued' magazine serial model was that any disruption or discontinuation – whether initiated by the author or the publisher – always risked undermining the integrity of the episodic format, which could alienate readers and damage the narrative's

[49] D. Gettelman, "The Victorian Novel and its Readers", in L. Rodensky (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel,* cit., p. 117.
[50] C. Levine, *The Serious Pleasure of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt,* Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2003, pp. 85-87.
[51] M. Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England, 1880-1914,* London, Routledge, 2019, p. 28.

momentum. For instance, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* in *All the Year Round* was nearly interrupted due to the novelist's illness.[52] Collins explains that he was motivated to write because he knew his audience was eagerly awaiting each new instalment every week, and this also provided him with an inner drive and a sense of connection that kept him alive and motivated. The continuous interaction with readers was crucial for him, maintaining his creative energy and providing him with a sense of purpose and direction in his work.[53] Disruptions in the serialization process could be caused by authorial procrastination. While some writers were committed to writing the entire manuscript before publication began, ensuring continuity, others wrote episode by episode, strictly adhering to the weekly publication deadlines, but rarely going beyond them. Despite its effectiveness in keeping readers engaged, this writing technique could also create continuous uncertainty for both authors and publishers due to the constant pressure of meeting delivery deadlines.

Before serialization, novels were both coherent and complete, and their structure facilitated immersion and through-the-night reading. By contrast, the new narrative forms of novels constructed with serialization are so episodic that they can be started on any page. Their recursive, homogeneous narrative style developed for such episodic material had become the general rule for all novels. Despite the shorter length of serial episodes, they encouraged a more leisurely reading practice, allowing readers to engage with the narrative at a slower pace. The older version of the novel, although it had a longer and more expansive text, required readers to move through the story faster because of its more compact and intricate structure. The pacing tended to be faster, with less room for digressions or pauses, forcing readers to focus more on the plot and characters. This results in a reading experience that is more concentrated and immersive, as the structure encourages a swift progression through the story, despite its longer length.[54]

In the nineteenth century, the novel became the most popular literary genre among middle-class readers of all ages. In order to meet the expectations of a conservative audience, publishers often censored or altered its content. Even though the harshest

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[52] See L. Graham, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, pp. 4-12.
[53] L. Graham and A. Maunder, "Collins and London" in *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 61-63.
[54] See J. M. Chavez, "The Gothic Heart of Victorian Serial Fiction", *SEL. Studies in English Literature 1500-1900,* vol. 50, no. 4, 2010, pp. 791-810.

critiques of novels from that period don't provide much insight into the actual reading experiences of ordinary people, their frequency highlights how important and potentially influential fiction was thought to be. What is certain is that the number of published novels and readers grew considerably, further solidifying the novel's cultural significance. Reading fiction became an everyday habit, widely embraced across different social classes.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the relationship between the novel and its readers started to develop into one of mutual dependence: a relationship that is both reciprocal and porous, emphasizing the continuity between readers' experiences of fiction and their own real-world experiences. I suggest that in looking across a range of both material and imaginative experiences that the Victorian reading public commonly had with novels – from borrowing circulation library books to resisting unhappy endings – it is possible to find a pattern in the way that readers encountered fiction as well as in how authors and critics thought they ought to approach it. The more novels were published in Victorian society, the long-standing concerns about quixotic readers copying what they read gave way to new understandings and depictions of readers having their own subjectivities that were interdependent with the fiction they read, and to theories of reading that valued this complex and imaginative intermingling. They did not simply follow the stories passively; instead, they actively transformed them by taking the newest serialized parts and making them fit their own thoughts and emotions.[55] In this way, novel reading in the mid-nineteenth century came to be widely regarded as a vehicle for intellectual freedom, fostering independent thought and imaginative exploration. Over time, this connection became stronger, as reading was seen not just as a passive activity, but as an active, transformative experience—one that allowed people to move between the worlds of fiction and reality, helping them understand both in new ways. Reading novels was no longer just for entertainment, but also for personal growth and reflection on the world around them.

[55] See L. Graham, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press,* cit., pp. 30-33.

Chapter 2

In the Mirror of the Novel

2.1 Narrative Landscapes: The Victorian Novel's Evolution and Influence

The production of illustrated books, newspapers, and magazines increased dramatically in the second half of nineteenth century due to innovations in printing techniques, which also brought about the introduction of colour printing. The ever-expanding popularity of photography has led to new ways of seeing since the 1850s.[56] The visual aspect is crucial for the realist novel, due to its ability to confirm factual reality through the eye, but the methods used by the writer to translate the visual into words and the significance of the imagery were just as complex and varied as Victorian realism itself. For example, in the first chapter of *Oliver Twist* published in 1838, Dickens (1812-1870) adopts a typically nineteenth-century perspective, which is that of Victorian realism, based on the idea that outward appearance, particularly clothing and the physical environment, was a reliable indicator of an individual's social identity, moral character and social status. This reflects a materialistic worldview widespread in the nineteenth century, according to which the visible world significantly mirrors deeper truths about society and the human condition. This perspective reflects the worldview of the time, influenced by broader ideas such as those of Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) in his famous *Sartor Resartus* published in1834. Carlyle, in fact, explores the symbolic reality of clothing as a means to express the social condition and expectations that society has towards the individual. Dickens takes up this reflection to introduce Oliver, the protagonist, and to show how his poor and unkempt clothing immediately represents his social identity. It is a powerful example of how clothes can determine our place in the world and society.

[56] See A. Thomas, *The Expanding Eye: Photography and the Nineteenth-Century Mind,* London, Routledge, 2018, pp. 80-81.

> And what an excellent example of the power of dress young Oliver Twist was! Wrapped in the blanket which had hitherto formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; – it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have fixed his station in society. But now he was enveloped in the old calico robes, that had grown yellow in the same service; he was badged and ticketed and fell into his place at once – a parish child – the orphan of a workhouse – the humble, half-starved drudge – to be cuffed and buffeted through the world, despised by all, and pitied by none.[57]

The visual aspects of the novel, so central in Dickens's realism, were challenged by new literary trends. The sensation novel dramatized the uncertainty and unreliability of what was seen, portraying individual perception as often deceived. Unlike realist fiction, which relied on detailed visual description to convey truth and social meaning, sensation novels exposed how appearances could mislead, revealing hidden identities and domestic secrets behind seemingly ordinary surfaces.

The Victorian novel deals with the new social mobility of individuals in nineteenth-century England by portraying what is commonly referred to as "class" not just as a social category, but as a bodily affect, according to Tomkins' theory. Tomkins argues that emotions are not only mental feelings but also manifest themselves physically in the body. In other words, in his view emotions have a body dimension that is visible.[58]

This idea helps explain why Victorian novels represent class not only as a social category, but also as the physical and emotional experiences that influence how characters and readers perceive social status. The Victorian novel's influence on social class can be attributed to its ability to combine the concept of class with emotions, or, more specifically, to its portrayal of class as an emotion. In other words, what is essential in the representation of class in Victorian novels is the visceral effect that these descriptions and perceptions elicit in readers. For characters in Victorian novels, knowledge of class tends to be bodily, instinctive, immediate. Indeed, the representation of class in Victorian novels frequently relies on metonymic cues that involve sights and smells, as well as social

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[57] C. Dickens, *Oliver Twist,* London, Penguin Classics, 1995, pp. 62-63.

[58] See S. Tomkins, "Visibility and Invisibility of the Affect System", in *Affect Imagery Consciousness: The Complete Edition*, vol.1-4, Princeton (New Jersey), Springer Publishing Company, 2008, pp. 95-111, p. 98.

indicators like food, manners, clothing, and speech. In the newly mobile context of Victorian England, indefinite economic or scientific definitions were settled in the affective realm through the use of cues and the intuitive reaction of characters and readers to them. In other words, to ensure that readers understood not only class identity but also its social significance, novels supplement affective cues with demonstrated responses: distress, disgust, and often shame when a middle- or upper-class character encounters (or feels him- or herself to be) someone "low," as well as admiration and perhaps self-revulsion in the presence of a superior.[59] While responses can help define characters' relationships with one another, they also serve as generalized representations of class's affective nature, shaping the middle-class identification that is implicitly concerned in the Victorian novel. Indeed, Tomkins and, after him the psychologist Paul Ekman saw themselves as building on Darwin's work on the emotions. Victorian roots are evident in the idea of studying emotions and defining and classifying them. Furthermore, given the nature of their classifications and definitions, especially the emphasis on shame, disgust, and "dismell", a term referring to the emotional response of disgust or rejection toward unpleasant odours, Tomkins' affects would seem to be based on the concepts of class difference and therefore, along with the concept of affect itself, they were Victorian in both spirit and origin.[60]

Victorian novels represent class primarily in affective terms. Victorian representations of social class are based on emotional elements in works such as Darwin's on emotions and present them as natural and inevitable. The same is true of other proto-sociological and pseudo-scientific writings about the poor. But what novels can do more explicitly than these other forms are represent class as a relation between persons: embedded, encoded, and communicated in the response of one character to another. In doing so, they provide an affective definition of social class and represent it as an affective category: something that appears inevitable and preconscious, a visceral reaction that, therefore, seems natural, situated beyond the boundaries of immediate consciousness and deliberate choice. This perception of crises and social transformation makes even more relevant the role of the novelist, whose task becomes to guide the reader emotionally

[59] A. Jaffe, "Affect and the Victorian Novel", in D. R. Wehrs, T. Blake (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies and Textual Criticism,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 713-733, p. 716.
[60] *Ibidem.*

through change. The task of novelist is to awaken the sense of pity and to melt the heart. From this perspective, the value of the novel lies not just in its moral or educational functions, but also in its ability to accurately depict the complexity of human experience, as shown by the reflections of Anthony Trollope (1815-1882), who argued that the fiction of Wilkie Collins, in spite of its contrived plots, was "real because Collins makes us feel that men and women with flesh and blood, creatures with whom we can sympathize, are struggling amidst their woes".[61]

Like realism, the woman writer was caught between the claims of art and life. The distinction between literature and what appeared to be beyond it was changing. Realism was seen as a part of the class issue: the rise of middle-class writers who defended realism was just the beginning of a story that would eventually take place in the working classes. Nevertheless, there was a time delay involved once more. Realism brought about a change in how the lower classes were depicted in literature; from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, they were shown with imaginative sympathy instead of being portrayed as buffoons. However, the advancement of writers who were truly working-class has helped reveal the full potential of the intelligent inner life hidden within the poor. But at least the Victorian novel's realism started the process, creating an assimilable tradition that brought high literature into a new relation with everyday subject matter, in the spirit of democratic education.[62]

The literary critic Lyn Pykett examines the ways in which the fantastic influenced different genres of fiction in the Victorian period. The Gothic is her primary example, which persisted in the Victorian novel through ghost stories, detective stories, and a range of late-Victorian degenerationist fantasies and imperial romances, even after the popularity of Gothic romances began to wane. Pykett states that the Victorian novels' emphasis on sensation and the fantastic may be seen as a manifestation of the personal or political unconscious, and as a way to confront, manage, and stage taboos associated with excess and the irrational. When combined, these forms of confrontation and management can be seen as a battle between opposing models of reality. Pykett concludes that the

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[61] L. James, *The Victorian Novel. Blackwell Guides to Literature,* Hoboken (New Jersey), Wiley-Blackwell, 2005, p. 69.

[62] P. Davis, *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume 8: 1830-1880: The Victorians,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 197-256, p. 237.

fantastic challenges conventional notions of language, time, space, unified characters, and the Victorian taste for linear narrative.[63]

The nature of reading was determined by the domestic ethos of the Victorian family: "we aspire to live in the Household Affections, and to be numbered among the household thoughts of our reader",[64] declared Dickens in his first editorial to his venture into popular journalism, *Household Words* (1850-9). Reading was a family affair. From Jane Austen's family at the beginning to the Brontë family in the mid-nineteenth century, family members read aloud to each other, in the way they watch television today. By reading aloud, the novel reached the heart of the family, and the process replicated the dialogue between the author's voice and the reader in the narrative itself. The world of the domestic novel came alive in a domestic setting:

> But the perfect illusion, the feeling of absolute reality, of sympathy – as beings who like ourselves have actually enjoyed and suffered – is, I believe, more intense when the novel, from the voice of a really good reader, gives life and interest to the winter fireside.[65]

The domestic anxieties of the novel were mirrored by those of the readers. Novelists were advised to envision their fiction in terms of different age groups and personalities, to expand their range of interest, and to write in a style that was accessible to younger readers. This did not mean the exclusion of adult interests. The recurring role of the governess in the novel reflected contemporary educational debates as well as concerns about the available opportunities for single women. Closer to home, domestic novels presented strategies for how families could handle bereavement, debt, and conflicting temperaments within the family group.[66] Meanwhile, their plot, characters, and moral dilemma became entangled within a shared consciousness. Louis James claimed that "Our girls become wives and our wives' mothers, and then old women, under the inspiration of

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[63] D. Deirdre (ed.), "Introduction" in *A Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 1-16, pp. 13-14.

[64] C. Dickens "A Preliminary Word", in *Household Words* vol. 1, London, Bradbury and Evans, 1850, pp. 1-2, p. 1.

[65] A. Marsh-Caldwell, "Preface", in *Emilia Wyndham,* vol. 1, London, Henry Colburn, 1846, pp. VII-XVI, p. VII

[66] See L. James, *The Victorian Novel. Blackwell Guides to Literature,* cit., pp. 73-74.

novels. Our boys grow into manhood, either nobly or ignobly partly as novels teach, and in accordance with such teaching will continue to bear their burdens gallantly or repudiate them with cowardly sloth".[67]

Just how far this was actually true is perhaps less important than the fact that both novelists and middle-class readers in mid-Victorian England believed it to be so. Families reflected the new approaches to children that were associated with the Romantic movement. In domestic novels, the emotions of family activities are depicted as constrained but intense. Victorian society was also clear-eyed about the impact of sexual infidelity during a time when there were few protective measures for middle-class women who strayed from their families. Sexual relationships form the core of the plots and concerns of Victorian novels, but their physical aspects were left implicit, revealing tantalizing silences for the modern reader: erotic emotions flashed in a fleeting eye-contact, the colour of a woman's hair, or the shape of a lover's handwriting.[68] If sex was often a silent area of the Victorian novel, home was a privileged space where vivid emotions and poignant recollection could be experienced, and it offered safety in a rapidly changing world. At this point, the celebration of the family went into sudden and dramatic reverse in the vogue for the sensation novel. For example, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) portrays Lucy Graham as the ideal domestic heroine. Braddon confuses the moral issues still further. While nothing of Lady Audley's inner life is revealed, she is driven by passions with which many readers would have sympathized. The prospect of returning to regular family life with Talboys drives Lucy Graham to murder and possibly madness. Earlier in the book Braddon's narrator railed against

> this cruel hardness in our life – this unflinching regularity in the smaller wheels and meaner mechanisms of the human machine, which knows no stoppages or cessation […] who has not felt, in the first madness of sorrow, an unreasonable rage against the mute propriety of chairs and tables, the stiff squareness of Turkey carpets, the unending obstinacy of the outward apparatus of existence? We want to root up gigantic trees in a primeval forest, and to tear their huge branches asunder in our convulsive grasp; and the

[67] *Ibidem.*
[68] *Idem,* p. 76.

> utmost we can do for the relief of our passion is to knock over an easy chair or smash a few shillings'-worth of Mr Copeland's manufacture.[69]

In the sensation novel, the protected circle of home can become the bars of a madhouse. The narrator's impotent rage mirrors the tension between domestic convention and the repressed passions Victorian women were expected to suppress. In this light, the home ceases to be a sanctuary and instead becomes a respectable prison that intensifies suffering and feeds madness.

The Victorian novel generally focused on domestic manners rather than abstract ideas. Intellectual life was primarily associated with the public masculine realm, so it was not a suitable subject for a form with a predominantly female readership. However, with the "rushing swiftness of its intellectual advance,"[70] as G. M. Young terms it, the Victorian age and the Victorian novel opened out from the domestic scene. The nineteenth century brought about a new set of narrative possibilities that were not present in the previous century, which allowed Victorian authors and readers to imagine their lives, write their novels, and discuss domestic and colonial policy. If the eighteenth-century novel had insisted on the value of an individual independent of birth and inherited wealth, a value that resided in such qualities of mind as reason, morality, sympathy, and the will to be oneself against all odds, then in the course of the nineteenth century, the novel questioned that individual and sought to contain, constrain, and normalize him or her in ways that at once created, reinforced, and updated a new and distinctively modern social classification system.

Emily and Charlotte Brontë's narratives of the mid-nineteenth century embody this transformation: the transposition of social and economic changes into emotional and sexual disturbances. Through the inner conflicts and passions of the characters, particularly women, their works depict significant historical and material upheavals (such as poverty, economic injustice, and oppression). It is as if they meant that from a single person – apparently insignificant and powerless, if that person is a woman – a chain of destruction can spring. In other words, the Brontë novels dramatize the notion that social chaos can be explained or resolved by managing the female body and desire. Thus, their

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[69] M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret,* Oxford, Oxford World's Classics, 2008, pp. 175-176.
[70] G. M. Young, *Portrait of an Age,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 153.

narrative places the blame for the economic and social crisis on the female figure, presenting these issues in a symbolic form as if they were caused by the emotional or sexuality of a 'dangerous' woman.[71] It is a subtle and powerful critique: even novels that appear to be sensitive and complex can still engage in the rhetoric of accusing women within the context of the Victorian capitalist economy.

If eighteenth-century fiction invented "femininity", then it is fair to say that Victorian fiction invented "femaleness", in the sense that it began to merge cultural ideals with biological identity, fixing womanhood in the body. Femininity is a cultural and social construct referring to the behaviours, roles, appearances, and attributes that a given society associates with being a woman. It is not innate but learned and enforced through social norms. Femaleness refers to the biological aspects of being female, such as anatomy, reproductive organs, and chromosomal makeup. It is associated with nature rather than social behaviour or identity.[72] In Victorian society, it was thought that any other form of sexual preference other than the self-supporting, monogamous, paternalistic, heterosexual household was abnormal and should be suppressed by culture.[73] Despite the fact that Victorian heroines tend to be in pairs, the protagonist in each couple is battling between the extremes of femininity and femaleness, which puts her in opposition to her fallen sister or mother. The only way Victorian heroines, such as Jane Eyre, can satisfy their reproductive urges is by defeating the female within themselves.[74] The Victorian novel certainly drew on arguments about the relationship between female nature and the characteristics called femininity that social scientists were attributing specifically to women of the Western European middle classes, but the novel did something with the relationship between female nature and feminine culture that only such a popular medium could do. Gender became less of a guarantee for the reproduction of the ruling class during the Victorian era and more of a restriction on sexual reproduction. Thus, set in opposition to natural desire, or what might be called "femaleness," a woman's display of Victorian femininity marked the difference between

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[71] N. Armstrong, "Gender and the Victorian Novel", in D. Deirdre (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 97-124, pp. 100-101.
[72] T. Moi "Women Writing and Writing about Women", in *Sexual/Textual politics: Feminist Literary Theory,* London, Routledge, 1985, pp 50-69, p. 65.
[73] *Idem,* p. 108.
[74] N. Armstrong, "Gender and the Victorian Novel", cit., p. 110.

middle-class reproductive practices and those specific to the working classes. Were it not for the fact that Victorian fiction often portrayed heroines choosing the wrong man, readers would surely notice the conspicuous failure of middle-class masculinity to prove itself against rivals across many decades and sub-genres of nineteenth-century fiction. Precisely because of this ability to express emotion and the depth of feelings, Victorian writers such as Charlotte Brontë presented Jane Eyre with what may appear to be a wider selection of men, but her heroine nevertheless dismisses all candidates who could, by any stretch of the imagination, belong to the modern middle class, preferring a well-born mate for her heroine whom the novel cuts down to size and whom the heroine rehabilitates for a modern household. Therefore, according to this perspective, the novel was the particular province of the woman writer, who "by her greater affectionate needs, her greater range and depth of emotional experience, is well fitted to give expression to the emotional facts of life".[75] This perspective highlights the distinct role that women writers played in Victorian literature, as they were uniquely equipped to express the emotional complexities of life. By exploring deeper emotional experiences and relationships, they were able to offer insights into the human condition that were often overlooked in male-dominated narratives. The novel was the ideal format for these writers to convey the subtleties of emotional and social dynamics, challenge societal conventions, and reshape the role of women in literature and society.

2.2 'Veiled Voices': Women in Victorian Literature

This literary tendency juxtaposing competing models of masculinity and femininity revealed deeper cultural anxieties surrounding shifting gender roles and class identities. Victorian fiction depicted the inadequacies of middle-class men and complicated the agency of their female counterparts, illustrating the larger social struggle to navigate a rapidly changing world. It is apparent that society was in turmoil, and it was necessary to redefine or confirm certain norms, traditions, roles, expectations, and duties. Therefore, creating categories and spreading stereotypes was a way for men to react to these new developments and to try to regain control over women, who were challenging their

[75] G. H. Lewis, "The Lady Novelist", *Westminster Review,* London, 1852, pp. 129-141, p. 133.

assigned roles and attempting to break free from the restrictions that society imposed on them. The glorification of the housewife, known as the 'angel in the house', took hold of society with unprecedented vigour when New Women started demanding their independence. Suzanne Cooper points out that the Victorian obsession with respectability and its definition was centred around the attempt to restrict women to certain roles, which in turn was part of the issue of keeping control.[76] Being respectable in the Victorian middle class meant everything, and those who lost that status were shunned, such as fallen women, who were ostracised from society and left with few other options but to either go to the workhouse or work as prostitutes. 'Prostitute' was a term used in the nineteenth century to describe not solely sexual workers, but also unmarried women who were in relationships with men, unmarried mothers, unfaithful wives, and mistresses, as well as artists' models and certain kinds of actresses.[77] It was a new high point in the contrast between two sides of women: the good and chaste, and the sinful and sensual. It is not surprising that both 'types' of women played a significant role in the art and literature of the time. Of course, it was not an entirely new phenomenon. Mary and Eve are believed to be the initial female stereotypes in Western Christian cultures. The holy Virgin, pure and good, willing to sacrifice and to be made an instrument of God, versus the temptress, herself seduced by the Devil, carnal in her sinfulness, who transgressed the rules lain down to her and thereby triggered not just her own fall but the fall of man, the expulsion from Paradise.[78] Although it influenced most ideas about femininity, the contrast between Mary and Eve was a relatively abstract concept that probably did not have a significant impact on the everyday lives of most women. In the nineteenth century, especially in the second half, things began to change dramatically. Female purity was portrayed not as a Madonna in heaven, but as an angel in the house.

It was believed that the primary role of a woman was to care for her family and household, while her husband was responsible for working, earning money, and protecting the family. Women (both wives and daughters) could stay at home and develop the skills necessary to become a lady, such as painting, singing, and fine needlework,

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[76] S. F. Cooper, *The Victorian Woman,* London, Victoria and Albert Publishing, 2001, p. 77.

[77] S. Kühl, "*The Angel in the House* and Fallen Women: Assigning Women their Places in Victorian Society", *Open Educational Resources,* Oxford, University of Oxford, 2016, pp.171-178, p. 172.

[78] See S. Gilbert and S. Gubar, "The Madwoman in the Attic", in J. Rivkin and M. Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: an Anthology,* Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 1998, pp. 812-825, p. 814-16.

which became a symbol of a respected status.[79] It was also a way of trying to protect their innocence by keeping them away from any potential bad influences and temptations. The more chaste and innocent a young woman, or even a wife was, the more she embodied the ideal of the angel in the house. One example of this is the painting *The Awakening Conscience* by William Holman Hunt, which illustrates what happened when a woman strayed from this ideal, capturing the critical moment in which she became aware of her situation and felt the urge to redeem herself.

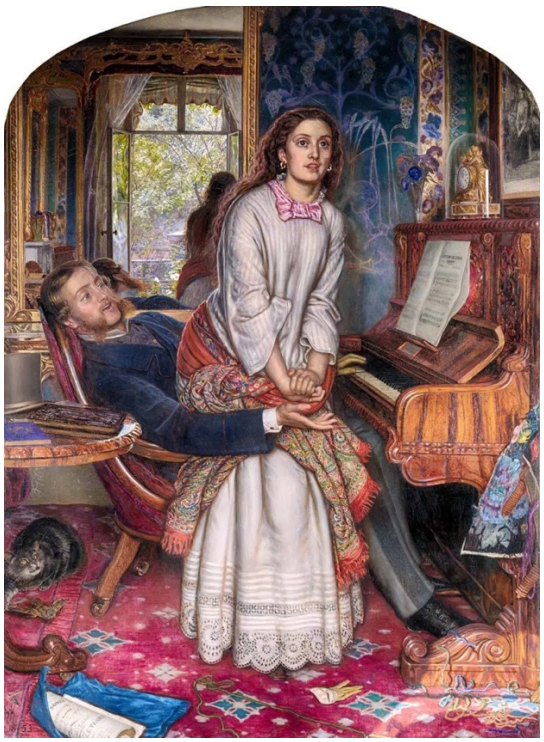

Figure 1. Willian Holman Hunt, The Awakening Conscience, 1853, oil on canvas, 76.2cm x 55.9 cm, Tate Britain, London.

At first glance, it seems that the painting depicts marital bliss with a husband and wife sharing an intimate moment and singing together in their beautiful home. The image is not of a street prostitute or an outcast woman, but of a young woman who is easily imaginable as coming from a respectable background and having once been very innocent

[79] S. F. Cooper, *The Victorian Woman*, cit., p. 12.

and pure. However, according to Victorian critics she has been seduced by the man beside her and, at this very moment, she may be seen as realizing the terrible mistake she has made. Hunt's work is much more difficult to interpret. Solving the puzzle requires careful examination of the subtle details and symbolic clues within the painting. *The Awakening Conscience* depicts a young woman who has been seduced but has seen the error of her ways and appears to be seeking redemption. According to Kuhl, she has thrown away her life; while she may be forgiven in the Afterlife if she truly repents, it is unlikely that she can fully redeem herself in this world.[80] In this way, Hunt not only condemns the consequences of straying from social norms, but also suggests a possibility of redemption by urging women to abandon their moral compromise for the sake of domestic virtue.

The domestic hearth was associated with confinement and torpor, a space where the lives of women were fragmented and consumed by social obligations. The accumulation of nervous energy, which has had nothing to do during the day, makes them feel every night when they go to bed, as if they "were going mad".[81] These labels were almost impossible for middle-class women to escape, as they either had to comply with social expectations and become chaste, obedient domestic angels or they would almost certainly fall within the category of a fallen woman. Women who dared to challenge this status quo risked being confined for mental instability. As a result, they were definitively assigned distinct positions within society – positions that seemed entirely unrelated to one another.

Both roles, whether as the idealized domestic angel or the so-called fallen woman, were meant to strictly control women's behaviour and autonomy. This control extended even into the legal and medical realms. According to these rules, a criminal prosecution could only be carried out if the defendant's mental state did not interfere with their sense of right and wrong. Psychologist complained that this was too simplistic. According to their argument, individuals with many mental illnesses were capable of distinguishing between right and wrong but were unable to resist the urge to commit crimes. This was especially seen to be the case with women. Women were believed to be guided by their bodily processes – processes that were believed to be pathological. Hence, according to some medical witnesses, numerous violent women had attempted to resist the urge to

[80] S. Kühl, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

[81] L. Pykett, "Women Writing: Nineteenth-Century Representations of Gender and Sexuality", in J. Shattock (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain 1800-1900,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 78-98, p. 88.

commit crime but were unsuccessful due to the pressures of their psychosomatic organizations; despite knowing they were doing wrong, such women, could not resist the criminal impulse.[82]

Another such figure was the mad mother, or the victim of puerperal insanity, a figure associated with a widely discussed female disorder during a period in which the female condition became increasingly pathologized, and in which "the predominance of women among the institutionalized insane first becomes a statistically verifiable fact".[83] The symptoms of this condition, which were an inversion of the maternal feminine ideal, included: "a total negligence of, and often a very strong aversion to, her child and husband […] explosions of anger […] with vociferations and violent gesticulations, and the abandonment of previously correct, modest demeanour".[84] The medical discourse on puerperal insanity merged with the legal discourse on infanticide as nineteenth-century society tried to reconcile the reality of mothers who killed their children with the ideal of the self-sacrificing maternal instinct, viewing infanticide as an unfortunate result of female biology and blaming it on a mental weakness that occurred right after childbirth.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley is perhaps the most famous fictional example of this condition. However, in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Braddon treats satirically both her heroine's self-diagnosis of hereditary madness passed on through the mother and activated by childbirth, and the diagnosis of Dr Alwyn Mosgrave (a specialist in women's illnesses), which leads to Lady Audley's incarceration in a Belgian sanatorium: the first is treated equivocally as a possible subterfuge which is used to avoid legal sanction, and the second as an equivocation, an example of the way in which medical discourse, male medical practitioners and male relatives combined to label deviant female behaviour as "mad".[85] The ideal mother "is the ghost that haunts" the nineteenth-century novel, as Victorian fiction, though deeply concerned with women's influence and domestic authority, seldom represents that power through actual maternal figures, instead

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[82] A. Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 12-13.

[83] E. Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980*, London, Virago, 1987, p. 52.

[84] J. C. Bucknill and D. H. Tuke, "Section VII – A Puerperal Insanity", in *A Manual of Psychological Medicine,* Philadelphia, Lea and Blancard, 1858, pp. 235-239, pp. 238-39.

[85] L. Pykett, "Women Writing: Nineteenth-Century Representations of Gender and Sexuality", cit., pp. 82-83.

"invariably feature protagonists whose mothers are dead or lost, swept away by menacing and often mysterious outside forces".[86] The absence or death of a mother was a key element in the creation and reproduction of the good mother as a cultural ideal; it attempted to reconcile the conflicting depictions of female sexuality, by concealing "the eroticized adult female in the disguise of a dead – and therefore virtuous, pure, noble, and true – mother".[87]

Female literary production reflected these oppressive dynamics, with the theme of the frustrated woman, who was deprived of the opportunity to realize herself artistically or intellectually, often appearing. The frustrations of the woman sacrificed on the altar of family, and held back by the claims of social life or by prevailing conceptions of a woman's role – preventing her from becoming a writer or painter, or from achieving anything of substance – were a constant theme in women's writing, as seen in *Jane Eyre,* for example, whose narrator reflects on this issue:

> Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.[88]

The issue of women's work and duties was fiercely debated throughout the nineteenth century, especially in Western Europe, in both academic context and within political and literary circles. Almost all approaches to the issue revolved around the question of whether work outside the home could be reconciled with the domestic, maternal ideal. Notably, as Jane Spencer has argued in relation to the rise of the novel in the eighteenth

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[86] *Idem,* pp. 87-88.
[87] C. Dever, *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. xi.
[88] C. Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 109.

century, ‘this feminization of literature defined a special category supposedly outside the political arena, with an influence on the world as indirect as women’s was supposed to be’.[89]

The feminine mode of women's writing was associated with, and believed to be derived from, women's affective nature and familial role.[90] Even when its subject-matter or form was romance, the prevailing or preferred mode of the proper feminine was realistic. Contemporary reviewers and theorists of fiction believed that realism (especially domestic realism) was particularly fitting for women writers, as it supposedly represented or served as a vehicle for their limited experience and limited powers.[91]

In 1894, a *Quarterly Review* article on New Woman fiction by W. Barry reiterated that feminine realism is derived from the affective nature and subordinate social status of women:

> [Women] observe minute traits of conduct; they spy unconsciously upon the men their masters and learn the signals which betoken storm and sunshine...when a woman sits down to write a story, she is exercising the same kind of faculties that enable her to overcome mere strength by delicacy of interpretation and natural tact.[92]

Of course, from the eighteenth century onwards, there was a proliferation of conduct books for women, which encouraged young girls to be submissive, modest, and selfless; reminding all women that they should be angelic. Ladies were assured by the writers of such conduct books that “there are rules for all our actions, even down to sleeping with good grace, and it is considered a woman's duty to her husband, because if a woman owes her being to the comfort and profit of man, it is highly reasonable that she should be careful and diligent to content and please him”.[93] The arts of pleasing men, in other words, were not only angelic characteristics; in more worldly terms, they were the proper acts of

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[89] J. Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen,* Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 1986, p. xi.
[90] L. Pykett, *The ‘Improper Feminine’: the Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing,* London, Routledge, 1992, p. 25.
[91] *Ibidem.*
[92] W. Barry, “The Strike of Sex”, *Quarterly Review,* vol. 179, London, 1894, pp. 289-318, p. 305.
[93] S. Gilbert and S. Gubar, “The Madwoman in the Attic”, cit., p. 816.

a lady. A woman with right feelings was expected to dedicate herself to the well-being of others. And she was supposed to do this silently, without calling attention to her exertions, since anything that might distract her from others and turn her focus inward was considered harmful.

A woman writer was required to examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of angels and monsters that male authors have created for her. Some scholars have suggested that "in order for women to write, we must first 'kill' the angel in the house".[94] In other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been "killed" into art. The images of "angel" and "monster" have been so common in literature written by men that it has also influenced women's writing to a point where few women have definitively "killed" either character.[95] Finally, the ability of the angel-woman to manipulate her domestic/mystical sphere to ensure the well-being of her entrusted ones is revealed by the fact that she can manipulate, she can scheme, she can plot stories as well as strategies.

Despite the most glowing texts celebrating the figure of the angel, the scheming, mortal flesh, and repressed explosive rage capacity of the Victorian angel are often acknowledged. Her feminine nature is used to influence and seduce with a strangely sensual realism that she uses through her voice, hair, and tears, and it seems as if every detail of her being is an invisible form of control over those around her.[96] In 1848, this figure was widely appreciated as a literary motif, and by the 1860s, she was frequently featured in sensational fiction in major works by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins. I argue that the mid-Victorian femme fatale served as a literary indicator of the shifting roles of women during the nineteenth century, particularly when middle-class women started to organize more radical feminist movements, and she hinted at future protests against society's treatment of women. Sensation novels from the 1860s implicitly show the extent to which an independent woman was considered a threat to Victorian culture by describing the *femme fatale* as a specific danger to men.[97] The *femme fatale*, who is a single and educated woman, poses a threat to bourgeois ideology by destroying

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[94] S. Gilbert and S. Gubar, "The Madwoman in the Attic", cit., p. 812.
[95] *Ibidem.*
[96] *Idem, p. 818.*
[97] J. Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: the Danger and the Sexual Threat,* New York, Cambria Press, 2008, p. 3.

the family structure and obscuring the definitions given to domestic women. The *femme fatale* in literature is seen to corrupt middle-class values.

The *femme fatale* represented the harsh conditions of modern life, where poverty, disease, slum housing, and prostitution reverberated the moral vices of the nineteenth century. She reflected social tensions that clashed with the prudish and unrealistic ideological standards of modern Victorian life. So, watching women like Lydia Gwilt, who were known for their cultured sophistication and free movement on city streets wearing heavy paisley shawls and black veil, was seen as a threat to this order. Her behaviour was deemed taboo: good women did not lead public lives and therefore were not to be seen among this urban setting addled with sanitation problems and social disease.[98] All mid-Victorian women were similarly ruled by these external circumstances. Furthermore, female readers in Victorian times may have believed that rebelling against social codes was not a moral offense because of subversive images of women. Because mid-century novels often highlighted women's lack of economic and social power, as well as their sexual repression – and because middle-class women in Victorian England had limited opportunities – female readers may have identified with the agitation and frustration the *femme fatale* experiences in her attempts to rise in society. Hence, the *femme fatale* made a profound impression on nineteenth-century popular culture, embodying the socioeconomic vulnerability of the Victorian woman. Unlike domestic or fallen women, mid-nineteenth-century femme fatales fought against conventional restrictions by opposing men who embodied the dominant Victorian ideology that oppressed women.[99] The figure of the *femme fatale* was introduced in the 1840s as a woman from a middle-class background who entered mainstream Victorian culture without being recognized as dangerous. At first, this stealth was a necessity because of the power and repressive force of patriarchal thinking. Although she was young and attractive, she was dangerous because she successfully blended into mainstream society. Other characters usually viewed her as innocuous because of her reticent manner and modest physical appearance until the plot developed. Lady Audley, portrayed by Braddon as beautiful, conceals her beauty by hiding behind a childlike innocence facade, and her delicate features conceal her rapacious nature. Overall, Braddon's popular Victorian

[98] *Idem. p. 4-5.*
[99] *Ibidem.*

femme fatale seems too harmless to be taken for a Fatal Woman. Yet such camouflage is essential for dangerous women to enter aristocratic homes, escape poverty, and enthral elderly men with their innocence, helplessness, or fragility. As a *femme fatale* is often the subject of an investigation in which the detective seeks to uncover her true identity, she must cleverly defy his inquiries into her past, typically by plotting to murder him. Here another subversive subtext becomes apparent; order, stability, and authority are represented by the male protagonist who must restore them by the end of the novel, while the *femme fatale* represents disorder and ambiguity. In fact, this plot line concludes the transition of the male protagonist from a spoiled aristocrat to a vigilant protector, showing him risking his life to protect his family and wealth from the threat of the *femme fatale*, who undermines powerful aristocratic families. The *femme fatale* is a new representation of mid-Victorian women who demonstrate self-empowerment and wilfulness by resorting to desperate measures, such as adultery, bigamy, or murder. The *femme fatale* is the symbol of feminine sexuality's hidden secrets, while the male detective struggles to control the knowledge of her sexual past that forms the central mystery in the novel.

I argue that the construction of the *femme fatale* offers an empowering new image of mid-century Victorian women, challenging readers' dominant ideologies about women's roles. Contrary to the Angel in the House or the Fallen Woman, the *femme fatale* acquired authority by challenging male dominance. The struggle against sexist oppression in Victorian England is depicted through literary images of complex, manipulative, shameless, yet unconventional, and strong female characters. The *femme fatale* was a common stereotype, but she was also a reflection of the socioeconomic hardships faced by nineteenth-century British women.

At the time of the sensation novel, there was an intense public discussion about women and the law, modern marriage, and women's role in the family. It also saw an intensely sensational reporting of the social evil of prostitution, and of divorce cases with their records of marital failure and sexual transgression. The sensation novel's main preoccupations and plot situations were derived from these issues and how they were reported and represented in the press. Women's demands for education, their changing role within the family, and their rebellion against some of the constraints of proper

feminine behaviour also produced a great deal of comment in the press. The sensation novel was both a response to and part of this discourse on modern femininity.[100]

Although the New Woman novel was part of this cacophony, it also explored the various discordant voices on the Woman Question as a way to explore the numerous contradictions that characterised the late-Victorian conceptualization of the feminine. The plot situations of the women's sensation novel and the New Woman novel, and the ways in which they represented female characters, the realities of women's lives, and relations between women and between women and men, were all produced by, and as a response to, the changing and contested discourses on woman. The representation of women and their lives in these novels and stories was part of the discourse and became a part of the current meaning of "woman".[101] Social movements were frequently depicted by commentators on the contemporary scene using the sensation novel and the New Woman novel as evidence or symptom during the 1860s and 1890s. Sensation heroines and fictional New Woman entered the general discourse as representative types of modern femininity. Initially, the New Woman was a contrast to the Angel in the House, but eventually this new category provided an escape from this restrictive opposition and enabled women to gradually redefine their identities. Nevertheless, the tendency to categorize women remained and there were certain expectations of women's roles in society.

The *femme fatale* became a cultural phenomenon because sensation fiction established her as a central motif of mystery and intrigue in Victorian novels.

2.3 Sensation Fiction: Intrigues, Mysteries and Social Critique

The *femme fatale* was a key symbol during this expanding popularity and widespread consumption of novels, particularly sensation fiction, which represented the intrigue and mystery that captivated both readers and critics, while also indicating the anxieties surrounding women's changing roles in society. "We have become a novel reading people

[100] L. Pykett, *The 'Improper Feminine': the Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing,* cit., p. 20.
[101] *Idem,* p. 21.

[…] Novels are in the hands of us all, from the Prime Minister, down to the last appointed scullery maid".[102] As already suggested, there were audience members who viewed novels with suspicion, from evangelicals who distrusted any fiction to critics who specifically criticized the "light reading" that was widely consumed by women.

One of the most distrusted and most popular forms was certainly what came to be known as "sensation fiction".[103] Around 1860, this became a distinct genre in Britain. The term was coined, on the analogy of "sensation scenes" on the stage, in response to the unprecedented wave of bestsellers inaugurated by Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859), Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862).[104] The new genre was perceived as being transgressive because it directly appealed to the 'nerves,' causing a physical sensation due to its surprises, plot twists, and startling revelations. It was also distinctive in its popularity, often across a range of readerships, and in its commercial, as well as cultural, success. In Britain, there was particular concern about literature that crossed class boundaries, and sensation seemed not only to cross "down" – from mistresses to servants – but also "up," as startling "penny-dreadful" plots seemed to be moving into the middle-class three-decker.[105]

Sensation fiction was often associated with female readers and, though not always, with female writers. It was thought to be written and read quickly rather than with discerning eyes; a "mass-produced," disposable consumer product.[106] These novels usually featured ordinary upper- or middle-class families in domestic settings experiencing surprising emotions and events, and were current in their subject matter, often addressing topics that were recently popular in the press. Finally, the genre was identified by the tone of the period's critics: they were unwillingly attentive, sometimes grudgingly admiring, but also censorious of its 'low' appeal to physical appetites for sensory sensations, whether sexually explicit or pleasurably horrific, its questionable morality, and inadequate or inappropriate style.

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[102] A. Trollope, "On English Prose Fiction as a Rational Amusement (1879)", in M. L. Parrish (ed.), *Four Lectures by Trollope,* London, Constable Publisher, 1938, pp. 94-139, p. 108.
[103] P. G. Gilbert, "Introduction", in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 1-10, pp. 1-2.
[104] W. Hughes, "The Sensation Novel", in P. Brantlinger and W. B. Thesing (eds), *A Companion to the Victorian Novel,* Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2002, pp. 260-278, p. 260.
[105] P. G. Gilbert, "Introduction", in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, cit., p. 2.
[106] See W. Hughes, "The Sensation Novel", cit., p. 264.

In novels with different styles and attitudes, the use of middle-class homes and family relationships as settings for secrets, mysterious identities, murder, seduction, blackmail, and bigamy was a common denominator. The plots involved in the stories were particularly suited to make readers rush to buy the next instalment. The novel's moral purpose was perceived to be subverted, and its emphasis on sensation was thought to appeal to the lower instincts of its readers. The use of plots and characters previously associated with disreputable penny magazines caused 'the reading of the kitchen' to become the favourite reading in the drawing room, breaking down social boundaries of decency.[107] The arbiters of taste were particularly appalled by the stories' moral ambiguity and their depiction of 'heroines' who challenged all the conventions of women as the embodiment of moral values and the support of husband and children. By using emotional excess from melodrama and mystery, as well as menacing settings from the Gothic tradition, this sensation novel deconstructed the ideal of mid-Victorian domesticity, revealing the emotional needs and sexuality that had been repressed by its conventions.[108]

In its time, the sensation novel was published as a response to the strict customs of the mid-Victorian period. The repressed passions beneath respectability, as well as the fear of hidden secrets or indiscretions that could bring social disgrace, helped to inspire it. In sensation novels, the gothic archaic and exoticized settings are replaced by the English country house or bourgeois villa. As Henry James put it, sensation novels were concerned with:

> … those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries that are at our own doors. This innovation gave a new impetus to the literature of horrors. It was fatal to Mrs. Radcliffe and her everlasting castle in the Apennines […] Instead of the terrors of Udolpho, we were treated to the terrors of the cheerful country house, or the London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible.[109]

[107] *Idem,* pp. 270-73.
[108] L. James, *The Victorian Novel – Blackwell Guides to Literature,* cit., p. 216.
[109] H. James, "Miss Braddon", *The Nation,* vol. 1, no. 6, New York, 1865, pp. 593-595, p. 594.

Sensation novels were also close to home in their subject matter. Often referred to as newspaper novels, they addressed contemporary anxieties and fantasies about marriage and family, as well as changing gender and class relations, often derived from sensational newspaper reports on criminal or divorce cases. The relationships between the declining aristocracy and the rising middle class, cross-class marriages, and the dynamics between masters and servants were widely discussed: for example, there were many plot situations where servants were spying on or getting involved in the secret plots of their masters and mistresses. Sensation novels examined gendered roles within society and the family, with a specific focus on the role of women as wives and mothers, and the role of men as husbands and contributors to the public sphere of wealth and work. They also addressed how the law regulated social and sexual behaviour and highlighted how contemporary marriage laws and customs often trapped and victimized women. Nevertheless, most sensation novels ultimately "redeemed" marriage by placing their heroine in, or returning her to, a happy union.[110] Murder, blackmail, fraud, adultery, and bigamy are common plot components in the sensation novel's unveiling of the secrets of respectable society. Sensation plotting can help readers and characters become detectives by suggesting the duplicitous nature of social reality. The middle-class home, which was at the heart of Victorian culture, became no longer a refuge from horrors or the brutalities of an encroaching urban and industrial society in the typical sensation novel. In fact, home was more likely to be the scene of the crime. Not only had it been invaded by mystery and violence, by impostors like Braddon's Lady Audley, but its very foundations were rooted in secrecy and criminality.[111]

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*'s Robert Audley is an excellent example of how a sensation novel creates widespread suspicion. Robert is transformed from the idle reader of morally suspect French novels to the active and suspicious reader of Lady Audley's behaviour. Robert Audley's internal reflection, framed as a rhetorical question, acts almost like an indirect and philosophical warning that he is on the trail of a hidden truth. It neatly summarizes some of the main preoccupations of sensation fiction:

[110] L. Pykett, "Sensation and the Fantastic in Victorian Novel", in D. Deirdre (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 192-211, p. 203.
[111] W. Hughes, "The Sensation Novel", cit., p. 261.

> "What do we know of the mysteries that may hang about the houses we enter? If I were to go tomorrow into that commonplace, plebeian, eight-roomed house in which Maria Manning and her husband murdered their guest, I should have no prescience of that bygone horror. Foul deeds have been done under the most hospitable roofs, terrible crimes have been committed amid the fairest scenes, and have left no trace upon the spot where they were done . . . I believe . . . that we may walk unconsciously in an atmosphere of crime and breathe none the less freely. I believe that we may look into the smiling face of a murderer and admire its tranquil beauty".[112]

Like gothic fiction, sensation novels were a combination of journalistic and fantastical elements, domestic and exotic, realism and melodrama. Their complicated plots, like those of gothic romances, cantered around terror, mystery, suspense, secrecy, deception, and disguise, and they frequently involved the deprivation and imprisonment of the heroine. Like their gothic predecessors, sensation novels aimed at the production of affect, writing disapprovingly of the sensation novelists' penchant for "preaching to the nerves," and appealing to the reader's animal instincts.[113] Their plots not only involved fictional characters in sensational situations, but they also affected the reader's body by appealing directly to the senses and stimulating physiological reactions such as creeping flesh, shocked nerves, teeth on edge, and even elevated blood pressure.[114]

The Newgate novel's fascination with crime, the motivations and psychology of criminals, as well as social criticism, persists in the sensation novel. Although the sensation novel was perhaps less openly critical of social issues than the Newgate or the realist novels of the late 1840s and 1850s, such criticism is often arguably embedded more subtly, but not less meaningfully, in the very structure of sensation plots, rather than delivered through the explicit narrative commentary typical of some earlier literature. Victorian literary critic H. L. Mansel, in his famous 1863 denunciation of sensation novels, observed that:

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[112] M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret,* cit., pp. 123-124.
[113] P. G. Gilbert, "Introduction", in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, cit., p.8.
[114] W. Hughes, "The Sensation Novel", cit., p. 260.

> Our task would be incomplete without some notice of the cheap publications which supply sensation for the million in penny and halfpenny numbers. […] These tales are to the full-grown sensation novel what the bud is to the flower […] They are the original germ, the primitive monad, to which all the varieties of sensational literature may be referred, as to their source, by a law of generation at least as worthy of the attention of the scientific student as that by which Mr. Darwin's bear may be supposed to have developed into a whale.[115]

Penny dreadfuls were both precursors and continuations of sensation: indeed, sensation was conceivably the middle-class reader's version of the thrilling plots and shocking revelations of the penny dreadful.

Sensation fiction incorporates themes and vocabulary consistent with debates over human descent and biological taxonomy: questions of genetic inheritance, the influence of chance, and the role of evidence in narrative teleology; the accumulation of diversity into descriptive detail and narrative development; and hybrid characters whose physical differences and social fluidity challenged their categorization within familiar biological and social frameworks.[116] As with the gothic genre, the sensation novel's ability to create a sense of terror or the uncanny often entailed sexual overtones or undertones. This is foregrounded in the first sensation scene in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, which reproduces for the reader the sexualized *frisson* of fear produced by the physical touch, sound, and appearance of the mysterious, dreamlike, ghostly (but nevertheless real) woman who seems to have been conjured from the fantasies of Walter Hartright, the narrator, "editor" of the narrative, and its hero.

> I had mechanically turned in this latter direction and was strolling along the lonely high-road-idly wondering, I remember, what the Cumberland young ladies would look like – when, in one moment, every drop of blood in my

[115] H. L. Mansel, "Sensation Novels", *Quarterly Review,* vol. 113, n. 226, 1863, London, 1894, pp. 481-514, pp. 505-506.
[116] S. D. Bernstein, "Ape Anxiety: Sensation Fiction, Evolution, and the Genre Question", *Journal of Victorian Culture,* vol. 6, 2001, pp. 250-271, pp. 254, https://doi.org/10.3366/jvc.2001.6.2.250.

> body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me.
>
> I turned on the instant, with my fingers tightening round the handle of my stick.
>
> There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road-there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven – stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments.[117]

Among the most shocking aspects of the sensation novel were its focus on bodily sensations – of fear, anxiety, and embarrassment as well as sexual feeling – and its representation of its female protagonists not simply as passive victims of male power and their own feelings, but also as actively desiring and, in some cases, self-consciously manipulating the desires of others to bypass the usual constraints of their gender roles and achieve what they want. For example, Collins's disinherited Magdalen Vanstone in *No Name* (1862), Lydia Gwilt and Lucy Audley, the socially aspiring femmes fatales in Collins's *Armadale* (1864) and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), the eponymous heroine of Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1863), and Olivia Arundel in *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863).[118] Marriage is what these women desire (though for divergent reasons), and their attempts to obtain, keep, or dispose of husbands are a significant part of the plots in these novels. Such novels may be read symptomatically as authorial and/or cultural fantasies or anxieties about women, sex, and power, but some of them may also be read as self-consciously anatomizing such fantasies and offering an element of critique of existing power relations.[119]

Even in respectable middle-class families, crime became a routine, not just an exception.[120] The proliferation of secrets implied that everyone had one, and that everyone else was down on his or her knees at a keyhole trying to ferret it out. The centre of the home was undoubtedly occupied by a woman, who was both a wife and mother, known as the proverbial angel in the house. At the heart of the sensation novel was the same woman, who managed the household, often quite efficiently, while also engaging

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[117] W. Collins, *The Woman in White,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 20.
[118] L. Pykett, "Sensation and the Fantastic in Victorian Novel", cit., p. 204.
[119] *Ibidem.*
[120] W. Hughes, "The Sensation Novel", cit., p. 262.

in bigamy, adultery, or murder on the side. The adventurer's character, which was more prominent than in previous fiction, started to blend with the heroine's. Without the detective's inside information, the other characters and reader could not tell the difference between the feminine ideal and the bigamist's fraudulent imitation.[121]

Sensation novels created their secretive narratives and provided an opportunity for investigation by portraying and exploring the 'uncanny' through hallucinatory or surreal scenes (such as Anne Catherick's various appearances in *The Woman in White*); through unconscious projections of various kinds (for example, Franklin Blake's concealment of the diamond in Collins's *The Moonstone*); through the portrayal of intense emotional states, such as hysteria, jealousy, sexual obsession, and paranoia; and, most importantly, through their depiction of insanity, along with other forms of social or sexual transgression or deviance that respectable society (mis)labels as madness. The sensation novel's use of madness repeatedly was a way to transcend social conventions and literary realism.

Two great names of the period who have attracted the most critical attention over the past fifteen years of sensation fiction studies are Mary Elizabeth Braddon and William Wilkie Collins. Both prolific and successful authors, they emerged as serious contenders in the literary marketplace at roughly the same time – *The Woman in White* in 1859 and *Lady Audley's Secret* in 1862, respectively. In a narrative landscape filled with psychological disturbance and social deviance, the novels of Braddon and Collins are notable for their incisive examinations of the deviant mind and the society that observes, represses, or instrumentalizes it. Up to this point, madness has been used in literature to question the boundaries of rationality and Victorian respectability. The following chapter focuses on the historical and social context of madness in Victorian society, specifically how it affects systems of confinement and control. The attention turns to Mary Elizabeth Braddon's female protagonists and how they embody and subvert normative expectations in subtle ways. Through an in-depth analysis of Lady Audley's Secret and Aurora Floyd, the analysis examines themes of dual identity, deception, and female resilience, emphasizing how madness and transgression expose the deeper contradictions within Victorian culture.

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[121] *Ibidem.*

Chapter 3

Masks of Madness: The Controversial Heroines of Mary Elizabeth Braddon

3.1 Madness and Confinement in Victorian Society

According to most historians, Queen Victoria's opening of the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace on 1 May 1851 initiated the golden age of what Elaine Showalter calls "Victorianism", the optimistic and confident period that lasted for the next twenty years.[122] Two months later, Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum, which showcased Victorian psychiatric reform, also opened its doors in Middlesex. Like the Crystal Palace, Colney Hatch, was a model of modernity, a symbol of British advancement and technology. Guided tours were even organized to show visitors around Colney.[123]

At that time, madness was considered the monstrous offspring of an advanced society. Victorian England, despite the widespread fear and social condemnation associated with epidemic insanity, still had a reputation as the centre of lunacy reform. From around 1830 to 1870, the humane management of madness was the driving force behind British psychiatry becoming the forefront of Western medical practice and British lunatic asylums becoming a leading destination for doctors and social investigators from all over the world.[124] However, during the Victorian era, the theory and treatment of madness underwent significant changes, some of which were revolutionary. Every county and principal borough of England and Wales was required by Parliament to construct large public asylums.[125] During the Victorian era, there were significant changes in the approach to insanity and how, in particular, it defined femininity. New legislation made the public asylum the primary institution for the treatment of the insane. As a result of the *Lunatics Act* of 1845, all counties and principal boroughs were required to make

[122] E. Showalter. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980,* London, Virago, 1987, p. 23.
[123] *Ibidem.*
[124] See M. Foucault, *History of Madness,* New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 12-14.
[125] *Idem,* p. 16.

provisions for the care of lunatics, which led to an unprecedented period of asylum construction; within two years, thirty-six of the fifty-two counties had built public asylums.[126] Class remained a strong determinant of the individual's psychiatric career. To avoid the stigma of certification, rich people could either keep their mentally ill relatives at home or seek private care. In the upper classes, strange behaviour would be labelled as nervousness or eccentricity until it led to unmanageability, suicidal behaviour, or violence. But middle-class patients were often forced to seek public assistance, since insanity was a costly disease. The public asylum was a welcome alternative to workhouse or home care for the poor; people with mental illnesses in poor families were often neglected, abused, or starved. Given the barely liveable conditions many working-class families faced, patients were often better off in the asylum than they might have been at home. By 1858, the "madhouse" had become a refuge for the mentally afflicted. Mad doctors became alienists, madness became itself "lunacy" or "mental deficiency" and its treatment became "psychiatry".[127]

Victorian theories about the cause of insanity were inconsistent. Doctors kept trying to identify a physical cause of insanity in lesions or inflammations of the brain and blood disorders. The assumption was that insanity was significantly attributed to organic problems, even if they were not precisely identified. Although madness was often attributed to brain disease, it was believed that sanity could be restored through a regime that fostered discipline and strengthened the will. The violence of manic patients, in particular, was thought to stem largely from the harsh conditions they endured.[128] Mechanical restraint was still used by mad doctors at the start of the nineteenth century to perform their duties. For a long time, a small but thriving market had supplied madhouse attendants with a variety of restraining devices: wrist cuffs, chains, shackles, ankle restraints, leather muzzles and gloves, straitjackets, restraint chairs, and even crib beds designed to confine patients. As John Conolly, head of Hanwell Asylum, wrote:

> In the gloomy mansions in which hands and feet were daily bound with straps or chains, and wherein chairs of restraint, and baths of surprise, and even

[126] See M. Stevens, *Life in the Victorian Asylum: The World of the Nineteenth Century Health Care,* cit., pp. 21-22.
[127] E. Showalter. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980,* cit., pp. 27-28.
[128] *Idem,* p. 29.

> whirling chairs were tolerated, all was consistently bad. The patients were a defenceless flock, at the mercy of men and women who were habitually severe, often cruel, and sometimes brutal. […]. Old and young, men and women, the frantic and the melancholy, were treated worse, and more neglected, than the beasts of the field. The cells of an asylum resembled the dens of a squalid menagerie: the straw was raked out, and the food was thrown in through the bars; and exhibitions of madness were witnessed which are no longer to be found, because they were not the simple product of malady, but of malady aggravated by mismanagement.[129]

John Conolly's description of asylum conditions in the early nineteenth century is shocking. His testimony exposes both the widespread use of mechanical restraints and the constant cruelty and lack of compassion towards patients, who were treated as if they were animals. His words highlight the urgent need for reform and the critical role of external oversight in addressing abuse.

To cultivate a sense of self-esteem that would lead to self-control, it was suggested by Victorian-era physicians that it was best to treat the patient like a rational person. The Victorians hoped that homelike mental institutions would bring madness into the sphere of rationality, in accordance with their celebration of women's domestic role. Asylums were designed to house feminine irrationality and to treat it with paternalistic therapeutic and administrative techniques. Madness was safely managed and controlled in the Victorian asylum by arranging space and daily activities and routines. Officially, the use of physical restraint and force in British asylums was abolished and replaced with techniques of moral management: classification, surveillance, and the creation of a home-like therapeutic environment were necessary to encourage patients to develop self-control, self-respect, patience, and industry, with the kindly authority of the medical superintendent.[130] As Elaine Showalter observed, public asylums were structured according to the family model, where the resident medical superintendent and his wife (usually known as the matron) took on the roles of father and mother, the attendants acting

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[129] J. Conolly, "Part I – The Last Days of the Old Methods of Treatment", in *The Treatment of the Insane without Mechanical Restraints,* London, Smith Elder and Co., 1856, pp. 1-34, pp. 32-33.

[130] E. Showalter, "Victorian Women and Insanity." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1980, pp. 157-181, p. 158, JSTOR, Accessed 1 May 2025.

as older brothers and sisters, and the patients acting as children. Like children, patients were disciplined in a similar way, and families needed a combination of kindness and authority to maintain order. In this setting, madness itself was domesticated.[131] By 1844, twenty-seven out of thirty county asylums had adopted the new method, and non-restraint had become the symbol of Victorian psychiatric leadership. In the end, the purpose of moral management was to cure insanity, and the prospect of a cure was the main reason for the new asylum techniques.

Victorian reformers were invariably creating structures of class and gender that were "moral", that was "normal", based on their standards of social order and gender subordination while planning and constructing the new asylums.[132] The difference in the perception of madness in men and women in England was particularly clear. It was thought that women were more susceptible to insanity than men, and they were believed to experience it in unique feminine ways, as depicted in both scientific treatises and literary texts, and they were affected differently by it in their daily lives. A significant shift in how madness was viewed and treated occurred at the end of the eighteenth century, leading to the beginning of differentiation. Previously, lunatics were seen as unfeeling brutes and ferocious animals who required chains, whips, strait-waistcoats, barred windows, and locked cells, but now they are seen as sick human beings whose sanity could be restored by kindly care.[133] The first psychiatric revolution is attributed to this ideological shift. English social reformers, including magistrates, wealthy philanthropists, and lay therapists, examined the usual methods of treating the insane at private madhouses, workhouses, and prisons and started creating alternative institutions – asylums – that used paternal supervision and religious ideals instead of physical coercion, fear, and force. At this point, the distinction between reason and unreason took on sexual connotations, and the symbolism of the insane person switched from male to female.

The asylum's classification and segregation of lunatics was determined by their disorders, social class, and gender. Architects and lunacy reformers worked together to create buildings that were in line with these intentions. Superintendents preferred

[131] E. Showalter. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980,* cit., p. 28
[132] *Idem,* p. 34.
[133] See J. Conolly, "Part I – The Last Days of the Old Methods of Treatment", cit., pp. 28-29.

buildings that were stretched out in a long line, which enabled the separation of male and female sides. Regardless of the model chosen, it was essential that the asylum didn't look like a prison.[134] Finding a balance between comfort and luxury was necessary in designing asylums and avoiding over ornamentation that would spoil poor lunatics and stimulate their tastes that could not be satisfied in their real lives. Despite its enormous scale, the asylum was designed to emulate the virtues of a Victorian cottage instead of those of a palace.[135]

The program of self-improvement, which was seen by many physicians as essential for mastering mental disease, included intellectual activities carefully organized to suit different classes. Inmates, attendants and visitors were often present at the lunatics' ball, which was the most popular form of asylum recreation. Dances were allowed to take place once a week at certain asylums during the Victorian age.[136] Most observers were captivated by the illusion of normality that the lunatics' ball presented. Madness, when observed from such a close distance and during holiday settings, was no longer a gross and unmistakable deviation from appropriate behaviour, but a collection of slightly disconcerting gestures and postures. Many observers found the lunatics' ball to be a superb example of the Victorian asylum's disguised control, causing a nagging sense of dissonance: "You feel in the midst of the merriment that there is something wanting, that the wine is corked, that the cake has a leaven of madness in it, that there is only eleven pence-halfpenny out of the shilling in the pockets of the dancers, that there is a tile off the roof of the ballroom".[137]

It is significant that the Victorian institution not only domesticated and assimilated insanity, but also feminized it. Women held a special position in the ideology and practice of Victorian psychiatry. The mid-nineteenth century marked the period when the predominance of women among the institutionalized insane became a statistically identifiable trend.[138] By the 1850s, there was a gradual increase in the percentage of women in Victorian asylums, and by the end of the decade, there were more women than men in public institutions. In private asylums, men continued to make up the majority of

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[134] M. Stevens, *Life in the Victorian Asylum: The World of the Nineteenth Century Health Care,* cit., p. 34.
[135] E. Showalter. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980,* cit., p. 36.
[136] *Idem,* p. 39.
[137] *Idem,* p. 77.
[138] See E. Showalter. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980,* cit., p. 3.

middle- and upper-class patients. But by 1890, women outnumbered men across all social classes and types of institutions; most licensed houses, registered hospitals, and county asylums housed female paupers as well as female private patients.[139] By the end of the century, women had come to dominate the population of psychiatric patients, a trend that has continued and even increased over time. The influence of social class and income on an individual's psychiatric career was evident, and the increase in female patients was connected to the enormous expansion of asylum facilities for the poor. By 1890, the total inmate population was made up almost exclusively of pauper lunatics, making up ninety-one percent of all mental patients. Being poor was a factor that made them more likely to be labelled as mad.[140] Women tended to be on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and the body in the dualistic systems of language and representation, while men tended to be on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and the mind in those systems; the representational tradition's asymmetry remains constant. Thus, madness, even when experienced by men, was symbolized as feminine through metaphor and symbolism: a female malady as Showalter made clear. In French, for instance, a man dressed as a woman, a drag queen, is even called "*la folle*" (the madwoman).[141] Not surprisingly, the madwoman has become an emblematic figure due to the cultural association of women and madness.

For Victorian doctors, the high number of women in asylums did not indicate a higher incidence of mental illness among women, but rather that female patients had a longer life expectancy and were less frequently discharged as cured. This medical interpretation focused on biological and statistical factors. However, as Elaine Showalter pointed out in her study *The Female Malady* (1985), other scholars and contemporary critics – including some social reformers – believed that this imbalance instead reflected the growing "feminization of Victorian poverty".[142] According to this perspective, women were institutionalized not only because they were mentally ill, but also because of their economic vulnerability, lack of family protection, or social deviance. Poverty was, after

[139] W. L. Parry-Jones, *The Trade in Lunacy: A Study of Private Madhouse in England in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,* London, Routledge, 2007, p. 50.
[140] E. Showalter, "Victorian Women and Insanity.", cit., p. 161.
[141] E. Showalter. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980,* cit., p. 4.
[142] *Ibidem.*

all, considered one of the moral causes of insanity .[143] Poverty-law relief was mostly given to women, and individuals from the poorer classes were more likely to participate in institutional activities than those from the middle or upper class. It was believed that illness resulting from poverty had the potential to cause madness.[144] In her seminal *The Female Malady* (1987), Elaine Shawalter described "lactational insanity", as the term used to describe the delirium of poor mothers who nursed their babies for extended periods to save money and avoid conception. It was caused by malnutrition and anemia.[145]

Despite their awareness of poverty, dependency, and illness as contributing factors, the prevailing view among Victorian psychiatrists such as John Charles Bucknill and Henry Maudsle, remained that the statistics confirmed what they had long suspected: that women were more susceptible to insanity than men, due to the instability of their reproductive systems, which disrupted their sexual, emotional, and rational control. According to the psychologists, women were believed to be influenced by their bodily processes, which were considered to be pathological in nature. Some medical witnesses have reported that numerous violent women have attempted to resist the urge to commit crimes but have failed due to the pressures of their psychosomatic organizations. Unlike the rather vague and uncertain ideas about insanity in general put forward by Victorian psychiatry, theories about female insanity were more specific and assertive, directly linking it to the biological crises in a woman's life – puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause – times when it was believed the mind would become weakened, allowing the symptoms of insanity to surface. In particular, women were considered to be in a precarious and explosive time during their adolescence. The years between twelve and twenty were widely believed to be a season that was not pleasant, a crisis in which the entire heart and brain were filled with tumult, and all life looked strange and bewildering.[146] It was implied that any young woman could experience an unexpected violent mania.

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[143] *Ibidem.*
[144] *Ibidem.*
[145] E. Showalter. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980,* cit., p. 54.
[146] A. Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture,* cit., p. 13.

This connection between the female reproductive and nervous systems led to the condition nineteenth-century physicians called "reflex insanity in women".[147] The belief that a young woman could succumb to sudden and violent mania was rooted in the medical theory of the time, as demonstrated by George Man Burrow's assertion that "the functions of the brain are so intimately connected with the uterine system, that the interruption of any one process which the latter has to perform in the human economy may implicate the former".[148] Puberty was regarded by doctors as one of the most psychologically dangerous periods of the female life cycle. Menstrual discharge is argued by doctors to increase the likelihood of women developing insanity, adding that "in all cases of hysteria, we must take care that the ordinary functions of life, especially menstruation and alimentation, should be in proper order".[149] According to this theory, abnormal quantities or quality of the blood could affect the brain; in order to control blood, psychiatrists tried to use diet and venesection.[150] Puberty was undoubtedly a tumultuous time for Victorian girls, marking a potentially traumatic shift from the freedom of an androgynous childhood to the restrictive expectations of the adult feminine role.

Even the most extreme deviations from the ideal maternal model were explained by the psychological crisis related to the female body. The crime was the worst that could be imagined by a society that exalted maternity; medical theory struggled to explain the crime in a way that maintained the mythology of motherhood and the maternal instinct in a society that promotes maternity. It was claimed that mothers could cause similar devastation to family homes, just like female adolescents.[151] Motherhood was perceived as simultaneously life-giving and destructive. Some psychologists believed that the period of gestation could strain women's bodies and minds, potentially leading to sudden and destructive psychological disorders. The madness that resulted from pregnancy was

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[147] E. Showalter. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980,* cit., p. 55.
[148] G. Burrows, "Commentary VIII", *Commentaries on the Causes, Forms, Symptoms, and Treatment, Moral and Medical of Insanity,* London, Thomas and George Underwood, 1828, pp. 146-151, p. 146.
[149] A. Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*, cit., p. 19.
[150] M. Stevens, *Life in the Victorian Asylum: The World of the Nineteenth Century Health Care,* cit., p. 108.
[151] A. Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*, cit., p. 24.

not a melancholic or introspective disorder, but a violent and explosive condition.[152] According to the psychiatrist's explanation for puerperal insanity, women's minds were abnormally weak, their bodies were depleted, and their control over their behaviour diminished. In fact, infanticide did not occur randomly in the population; infanticide was rare in middle-class households with nurses and servants to assist with childcare due to puerperal insanity.[153] Breast-feeding was thought to be a drain on women's biological and moral strength, just like pregnancy. It is probable that menstruation and lactation were perceived as a system that determined and provided evidence of a woman's health. It was an old belief that breast milk that was not used could enter the cranium and result in insanity and death.[154] This belief raised concerns not only about the mother's health but also about the potential harmful effects on the breastfeeding child. It was believed that children suckled by women deemed insane were more likely to develop madness later in life, as mental impulses were thought to be transferable through breast milk.[155] This led to the theory that madness could be inherited. An emerging psychiatric theory believed that insanity was caused by organic defects, poor heredity, and an evil environment, following Darwin's theories of inheritance, evolution, and degeneration. Darwinian therapists considered the lunatic to be a degenerate person with a weak will and a morbid predisposition, which made them question the effectiveness of asylum care and paternalistic therapy; instead, they reformed themselves as psychiatric police, patrolling the boundaries between sanity and madness, and safeguarding society from the dangers of those with tainted stock.[156]

It seems that insane violence was associated with pregnancy, suckling, and childbirth at the mid-century. As Charles Arthur Mercier wrote:

> Insanity does not occur in people who are of sound mental constitution. It does not, like smallpox and malaria, attack indifferently the weak and the strong. It occurs chiefly in those whose mental constitution is originally

[152] *Ibidem.*
[153] E. Showalter. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980,* cit., p. 58-59.
[154] A. Mangham. *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*, cit., p. 26.
[155] *Idem,* p. 30.
[156] See M. Foucault, *History of Madness,* cit., pp. 394-395.

defective, and whose defect is manifested in lack of the power of self-control and of forgoing immediate indulgence.[157]

Whether or not medical specialists considered these factors, Victorian judges and juries took them into account, as they were hesitant to sentence infanticide women to death and responded compassionately to the insanity defence often used in their favour. The home secretary released infanticide women who were committed for life to Bethlem or Broadmoor more often than other criminally insane groups. Doctors, lawyers, and judges viewed infanticide as an isolated and biologically determined phenomenon, an unfortunate result of women's "nature" instead of examining the social meaning of it.[158]

The voices of women patients were never heard. Asylum case histories from the early nineteenth century were not typically revealing documents; little information was provided about the patients' lives, let alone their own words. Victorian asylum superintendents were not keen on listening to their patients or discovering their feelings and motives. The care provided by physicians or the medical staff involved dismissing the feelings of the patients, disregarding their demands and observations, and instead redirecting their attention away from "delusions" through physical activities and group recreation.[159]

In the specific historical context of the nineteenth century, hysteria can be seen as an unconscious form of feminist protest, the equivalent of the attack on patriarchal values undertaken by the women's movement of the time. These assertions are dangerously close to romanticizing and endorsing madness as a desirable form of rebellion instead of considering it as the desperate communication of the powerless. Madness, as Shoshana Felman has noted, is "quite the opposite of rebellion. Madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation".[160]

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[157] C. Mercier, "Part I – The Institutes of Insanity", in *A Textbook of Insanity*, London, Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1902, pp. 1-64, p. 54.
[158] See R. Smith, *Trial by Medicine: Insanity and Responsibility in Victorian Trials,* Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1981, p. 154-155.
[159] See M. Foucault, *History of Madness,* cit., pp. 181-182.
[160] S. Felman, "Woman and Madness: The Critical Phallacy", *Diacritics*, vol 5, no. 4, 1975, pp. 2-10, p. 2. JSTOR, Accessed 16 May 2025.

In a society that regarded women as childlike, irrational, and sexually unstable – and that denied them legal rights and economic independence – it is not surprising that they constituted the majority of the residual categories of deviance, which sustained much of medical practice and populated the asylums. Furthermore, the medical belief that the instability of women's nervous and reproductive systems made them more susceptible to derangement than men had a significant impact on social policy. It was employed as an excuse to deny women political rights, exclude them from professions, and maintain male control in the family and state. The study of Victorian women and insanity suggests, I think, that both insanity and femininity are culturally constructed, and the relationship between them must be understood within the cultural context. Insanity is closely linked to various social and economic factors, including the availability of custodial care, unemployment and migration rates, urbanization and isolation, as well as changes in family size and cohesion. It must be asked, nonetheless, whether women were truly more vulnerable to the stress of these various factors than men, or if the link between femininity and madness was culturally shaped in such a way that women faced the brunt of social change. Victorian psychiatric theories of femininity were based on the traditional belief that women were more emotionally volatile, nervous, and dominated by their reproductive and sexual economies than men.

It is important to have a broader cultural framework in order to understand how Victorian literature reflected and, at times, resisted dominant psychiatric narratives. Mary Elizabeth Braddon provides a compelling lens through which to explore the subtle subversion of these normative constructs.

3.2 Braddon and the Subtle Subversion of Norms

Born in London in October 1835, Braddon was the third child of Henry Braddon, a disreputable solicitor from a respectable Cornish family and his Irish wife, Fanny White, who had been educated in England. After her parents separated when she was four, Braddon experienced a rather peripatetic childhood, moving frequently with her mother. Although she attended three schools, her mother was the primary educator who nurtured her precociousness and introduced her to the vast world of imaginative literature. Her

love and knowledge of literature was nurtured by her mother's "cultivated mind […] and […] natural taste for what was best in the literature of the time" and especially her love of Shakespeare and Scott.[161] She wrote plays and went to the theatre often with her mother. When she needed to increase the family income in the early 1850s, she turned to theatre and acting instead of writing. In autumn 1852, she started performing professionally. Mary Elizabeth Braddon is widely recognized as the doyenne (or demon) of the sensation novel and a spark for discussions about sensation fiction. She first achieved success and became known as a sensation novelist with the publication of *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863) at the beginning of 1860s followed quickly by *Eleanor's Victory* (1863), *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863), *Henry Dunbar* (1864), *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), and *Sir Jasper's Tenant* (1865) all by the end of 1865. Braddon was also at the forefront of the revival of the sensation novel in the twentieth century. *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* were significant contributors to critical discussions of the sensation phenomenon and reached a large number of new readers through various new editions, which included adaptations for television and radio. Braddon's early success as a writer of sensational fiction allowed her to embark on a long, diverse, and prolific literary career. She wrote in various genres and styles, such as melodrama, naturalism, romance, domestic realism, social satire, and historical fiction. Additionally, she wrote numerous short stories and plays, although most of the latter remain unpublished and unperformed. In addition, she served as editor of the magazine *Belgravia* and the Christmas annual *The Mistletoe Bough.* The early numbers were produced entirely by Braddon, either under her own name, with a pseudonym like Babington White, or anonymously, and all but one of her novels in the first half of the 1870s appeared first in their pages.[162] Not only did Braddon use *Belgravia* to develop and cultivate a preference for her own brand of fiction, but she also used it as a platform to defend popular fiction and the sensational novel in particular against critics. Despite being aware of the evolving tastes of readers and the changing literary marketplace, Braddon remained somewhat sensationalist until well into the 1880s.

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[161] L. Pykett, "Mary Elizabeth Braddon", in P. K. Gilbert (ed.) *A Companion to Sensation Fiction,* Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 123-133, p. 124.
[162] *Idem,* p. 123.

The sensation novel was both a publishing phenomenon and literary genre. There was a connection to a bold and entrepreneur publisher who constantly sought out innovative ways to boost publicity, profits, and what we now refer to as market reach. Thus, *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd'*s success resulted in additional production in a similar fashion. Braddon supplied two markets: one for the lower-class audience who wanted anonymously written thrilling "penny bloods", and another for M. E. Braddon's equally thrilling, but more literary and sophisticated tales in a different social register.[163] Most of these novels replicated the formula that had made her successful, including bigamy, murder, disguise or impersonation, madness, blackmail, fraud, theft, kidnapping or incarceration, and inheritance plots.

The most fearsome threat to domesticity came from those who were supposed to be its defenders. As the notion of female treachery became more emphasized, marriage became a place where harsh control or sleazy trickery was practiced. It was manipulated by villains who were so power-hungry that their "pleasing outsides," as Mansel described them, hid "some demon in human shape."[164] Braddon acknowledged violating Victorian social convention by corrupting impressionable minds in her two or three novels a year, and by publishing shocking fiction anonymously and pseudonymously in penny dreadfuls.[165] She made a self-conscious effort to improve her writing by following Bulwer-Lytton's advice to have her plots emerge naturally from characters.[166] The novel's protagonist's character is a major source of inspiration for much of the story. Most nineteenth-century critics, unlike readers, were never satisfied with golden-haired heroines and plots focused on incidents rather than the evolution of character. The sensation novel controversy in the 1860s led to a critical vigilance against the priority of incident-filled plots over character analysis and development. Braddon's work was frequently targeted by attacks on the sensation phenomenon during the 1860s due to various reasons. These included the extraordinary success of *Lady Audley's Secret* and

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[163] *Idem,* p. 125.

[164] H. J. Mansel, "Sensation Novel", *Quarterly Review,* vol. 113*,* London, 1863, pp. 481-514, p. 489.

[165] C. J. Golden, "Censoring Her Sensationalism: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and *The Doctor's Wife*", in K. Harrison and R. Fantina (eds), *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, Columbus, Ohio University Press, 2006, pp. 29-40, p. 29.

[166] A. C. Sears, "Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the 'Combination Novel', in in K. Harrison and R. Fantina (eds), *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, Columbus, Ohio University Press, 2006, pp. 41-52, p. 43.

Aurora Floyd: her rate and volume of production in the 1860s, as well as the fact that she was a clever, witty, and accomplished writer whose books were eagerly read by both genders and all social classes, including some very distinguished figures (even Queen Victoria was told to have read *Lady Audley's Secret*), along with those otherwise hostile to sensationalism.[167]

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter asserts that Braddon no longer wrote books that were dangerous but ones that provided female readers with "a carefully controlled female fantasy" especially in *Lady Audley's Secret.* According to Showalter, Braddon's fiction "expressed female anger, frustration, and sexual energy more directly than had been done previously. Readers were introduced to a new kind of heroine, one who could put her hostility toward men into violent action".[168] Because of the categorization of her name, Braddon found herself in a creative bind. Her letters to Edward Bulwer-Lytton indicate that she was aware of her limitations as a novelist. She did not have a strong commitment to writing sensation novels but wrote them because the public required them and had expectation of sensationalism from her books. Bulwer was informed of her efforts to negotiate market demands and her desire to write "serious" fiction.[169] In 1862, as Braddon finished *Aurora Floyd*, she lamented: "I have written as conscientiously as I could; but more with a view to the interests of my publishers than with any great regard to my own reputation."[170] Braddon was dependent on the marketplace despite her desire to write less commercially. She concluded: "I have learnt to look at everything in a mercantile sense, & to write solely for the circulating library reader, whose palette [sic] requires strong meat & is not very particular as to the quality thereof".[171] However, despite the generic expectations for the sensation novel, this context can obscure Mary

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[167] See L. Pykett, "Mary Elizabeth Braddon", cit., p. 125-126.

[168] E. Showalter, "Subverting the Feminine Novel: Sensationalism and Feminine", in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, Princeton (New Jersey), Princeton University Press, 1977 pp. 153-181, p. 160.

[169] A. C. Sears, "Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the 'Combination Novel'", cit., p. 43.

[170] R. L. Wolff, "Devoted Disciple: The Letters of Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1862–1873." *Harvard Library Bulletin,* vol. 22, 1974, pp. 5-35, p. 10, <https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:427334825$7i>

[171] R. L. Wolff, "Devoted Disciple: The Letters of Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1862–1873.", cit., p. 14.

Elizabeth Braddon, who in her own day worked hard to surpass the function of genre while also conforming to it.[172]

Braddon's unconventional personal life resulted in her being a target of disapproving comments: her novels were specifically identified by reviewers as having mistresses, would-be mistresses, bigamists, and many of the negative criticisms of the sensation novel's bigamy and irregular liaisons were directed towards her novels. Her lack of knowledge of good society was cited as the reason for her social lapses and alleged failures to portray characters honestly. Other critics thought that her broad knowledge of theatre, men's talk, and the racetrack was inappropriate. However, it was not uncommon to think that this breadth of knowledge enhanced her writing's interest and power. The representation of women in Braddon's novels as restless, duplicitous, passionate, and sensual creatures with a tendency to dissatisfaction was frequently a target of criticism in the genre. Braddon played an important part in the sensation debate and was also one of its main focuses. Her novels served as a platform for her to discuss the sensational phenomenon and the value of other popular cultural forms, such as melodrama.[173] The fact that Mary Elizabeth Braddon was a woman and a fallen one because of her acting career made her a target of many attacks. Her work was rumoured to have inspired her readers to commit crimes, which led to her being strongly anathematized as a scandalous and disrespectful woman. Her sensational violent (anti-)heroines could be a source of inspiration for readers. Despite widespread criticism of her theatrical background, the Victorian fascination with crimes, revenge, blackmail, domestic envy and jealousy, murders, and forbidden adventures turned Braddon into one of the most prolific and brilliant minds of the second half of the nineteenth century, with the success of *Lady Audley's Secret* serving as a tangible testament to that.[174]

Braddon used her role as editor of *Belgravia* to defend sensation fiction and other light literature while also criticizing highbrow critics and periodicals who act as cultural police. *Belgravia* was Braddon's way of educating her readers about the use and value of light literature, as well as the appropriate critical practices and standards. Feminist and feminist-influenced critics highlighted Braddon as a neglected or undervalued writer,

[172] A. C. Sears, "Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the 'Combination Novel'", cit., p. 51.
[173] L. Pykett, "Mary Elizabeth Braddon", cit., p. 131.
[174] *Ibidem.*

emphasizing her inversion of the feminine ideal and her subversive portrayal of the constraints on women's lives and desires, though some argued that her boldness faltered in the final volume. Braddon's fiction was also enriched by a radical reappraisal of popular cultural forms and a challenge to traditional literary judgments in the latter part of the twentieth century, which in some ways resembled the changes she attempted to make in *Belgravia*'s pages.[175] In an effort to reframe the relationship between popular and high culture and redraw the map of the nineteenth-century novel, re-readings of Braddon's fiction have also been prominent. Twentieth and twenty-first-century critics have examined how Braddon's sensational novels represent and convey the anxieties, fantasies, and aspirations of male and female readers, as well as readers from different classes, to understand and explain their popularity. Through the analysis of Braddon's novels and the contemporary critical response to them, it can be seen how mid-nineteenth-century attitudes towards women as writers, readers, and subjects of fiction were perceived: gender and sexual relations; shifting views on marriage and divorce; the power and limitations of domestic ideology; class identities and relations during a time of social change; and the representation of the body and its effects in literature.

Braddon, along with others who wrote sensational novels, caused controversy by exploiting crime to create shock value and shifting the threat of crime away from the poor and uneducated sectors of society and towards the middle class itself. This "threat from within" was a feature of sensation novels that contemporary critics found particularly irritating.[176] The portrayal of the respectable classes as the perpetrators of criminal, often violent, activities was a new direction for fiction, at least on such a large scale. Previous novels that focus on crime tend to limit the depiction of violence and illegal activity to the lower levels of society, allowing middle-class readers to experience the sensationalism of transgression without being directly affected by it. Thus, the shift of focus signified the transition from a threat that could be easily identified and monitored to one that was hidden and could possibly be in close proximity.[177]

In particular, the sensation novel frequently concentrates on the secrets and secret histories of women. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's early novels are organized around women

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[175] *Idem,* p. 132.
[176] A. M. Beller, *Mary Elizabeth Braddon: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction,* Jefferson (North Caroline), McFarland and Company, 2012, p. 6.
[177] *Ibidem.*

who have hidden pasts: women who, for various reasons, conceal their current motivations and desires, and have a hidden mission that fuels their lives. In the vast majority of cases, these feminine omissions are the outcome and precursor of a conflict between the proper and the improper feminine. The heroine's respectability is usually threatened or tainted due to either a previous transgression of proper feminine behaviour or guilt by association in Braddon's novels' central secret. The main cause of concealment is when a woman's self-appointed mission conflicts with accepted feminine codes, or when women must act quietly, often using male agents, in a society that views them as passive and dependent. Except in Braddon's two best-known novels, *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, the secret centres on a conflict between the heroine's quest to avenge a wronged father (or father-figure) and the traditional code of femininity, which defines women as self-sacrificing, loving, and forgiving. Revenge is a generalized metaphor for a secret passion that commands and motivates a woman's actions.[178] *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* have the most spectacular presentation of family secrets and women's secret histories. Braddon's most successful novels are all about the secrets of a woman's transgressive past, not about her hiding guilty secrets from others. Both of Braddon's most popular heroines are criminals. Both are bigamists; one attempted to murder, while the other is believed to have done so. Like many sensation heroines, both Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd serve to both exploit and examine the fear articulated by another bestselling female novelist, that all women "possess a sleeping potentiality for crime, a curious possibility of fiendish evil".[179] Aurora's lack of a mother is a common theme in Braddon's heroines and most sensational novels. Aurora Floyd's transition from hidden transgression to concealed criminality is more accidental than intentional, due to her inadvertent bigamy. On the other hand, Lady Audley's secret criminality is, seemingly, a matter of cold calculation.

According to most critics, *Aurora Floyd* and *Lady Audley's Secret*'s power is due to their transgressive heroines. Both contemporary reviewers and later readers have placed a greater emphasis on the transgressive nature of these heroines than their criminality. This supports the belief that the bigamy novel was used to either develop the

[178] See L. Pykett, *The 'Improper Feminine': the Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing,* cit., p. 84.
[179] *Idem,* 86.

adultery plot in a different way or to depict a sexually active female character while maintaining the legal and customary rules that regulate female sexuality. *Aurora Floyd* and *Lady Audley's* characters are both elaborately portrayed using fictional female stereotypes. The contradictory discourse on woman, where women are portrayed as either demons or angels, is embodied by both characters in different ways. The two heroines embody and take advantage of the fear that women are "wild beasts" who can run wild if left unconstrained by the patriarchal family, a belief that pervaded middle-class culture.[180] Braddon's focus on her heroines' efforts to conceal their secrets, along with her detailed attention to their sensations and emotions, partly highlights the process of self-surveillance that was pervasive in a society where the "supremacy of the woman's moral nature and her potential degeneracy were the twin poles of a representation which had already transposed a panic about the social body – its ordered regulation and reproduction – into moral terms".[181] This tension between outward appearances and hidden truths sets the stage for a closer examination of dual identity in Lady Audley's Secret, where the protagonist's complex self-surveillance and social navigation reveal the fragile boundaries imposed on women in Victorian society.

3.3 Dual Identity in *Lady Audley's Secret*

Left by her mother, who is reportedly a "madwoman"[182], the girl once known as Helen Maldon is raised "[feeling] the bitterness of poverty and [runs] the risk of growing up an ignorant creature […] because [her] father was poor".[183] Helen opts to marry an older and wealthier man, rather than becoming destitute, by instinct, far surpassing the affluence of her first husband or the expectations of her bourgeois reader. Her final identity is that of Lady Audley. By audaciously committing bigamy and murder, she manages to escape poverty and detection, eventually marrying her wealthy aristocratic second husband and

[180] *Idem,* p. 88.
[181] J. Rose, "Femininity and Representation", in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London, Verso Books, 2020, pp. 30-144, p. 100.
[182] M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret,* cit., p. 296.
[183] *Idem,* p. 297.

killing her first husband, Talboys, who threatens to expose her at Audley Court. As a *femme fatale*, Lady Audley subverts the law and acts as a hidden predator.

Conventionally exploited within the socioeconomic structure, Helen Maldon, a young and inexperienced woman, represents the lower-class woman. She is portrayed like the girl on the streets, stopping by shop windows, yearning for and daydreaming about the images, trinkets, and items displayed in the print shops of Victorian cities, desiring to become like the girl in the advertisement. Eventually, her daydreams are crushed by the reality of her dreary working-class life, where her alcoholic father and her beauty are not put to any use or purpose. Concerned about inheriting her mother's insanity and being imprisoned in a mental institution, she chooses to create a different future for herself. However, Helen Maldon is bound to experience the same fate as her mother. She was also described as having fair skin, blue eyes, and innocence as a child. Similarly, her mother is a madwoman.[184] Lucy Graham's social value is increased by her education and skills in playing sonatas or reciting poetry, but poverty is a more significant indicator of status, showing that even educated women are economically powerless. The middle-class Victorian woman's beauty and education can be of little importance if they are not used to their fullest potential by securing an appropriate match. As a governess, Lucy Graham relies on her cleverness to improve her situation. To successfully portray a respectable, yet childlike, and helpless inexperienced young woman, both the *femme fatale* and single, domestic, middle-class woman must use their education. Miss Graham's success is largely determined by her appearances in both public and private settings. Sir Michael Audley encounters Lucy Graham, who appears to be an abstract ideal and spiritual guide because of her goodwill and philanthropy. Tricking everyone, from the highest to the lowest, Lucy Graham has "that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile".[185] Lucy Graham, a poor, young woman, will easily marry a wealthy suitor to alter her circumstances. Sir Audley surrenders to this game easily because of Lucy's disguise as an innocent young girl, but Lucy continues to reenact her role as the modest young governess, representing both desire and prohibition. Sir Audley falls deeply in love with his highly praised portrayal of Lucy, the mask she wears, and the story she creates, rather than the woman who is hidden behind the mask. Lady Audley is

[184] J. Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: the Danger and the Sexual Threat,* cit., p. 112.
[185] M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret,* cit., p. 11.

both sexualized and desexualized, creating a paradox. Her value and sexual appeal are increased by her youth, status, and innocence. She essentially becomes more of a product of her own choices and actions, shaped by a series of detours and quick decisions. Sir Michael, who was married to her because of his wealth and economic powerlessness, figuratively comes to possess her. Her hair, beauty, and charm are as effective on Sir Audley as they are on others.[186]

If middle-class women did not find suitable bachelors to marry them, they risked economic powerlessness. Lady Audley's actions suggest that if women are required to rely on patriarchy for economic security, they have no other option but to manipulate bourgeois social codes to self-empower themselves. Thus, patriarchy makes its conventional boundaries vulnerable by forcing women into duplicity as a means of surviving. Lady Audley, despite her portrayal as the archetypal domestic commodity-object, actually violates the law to maintain a pure image among male aristocrats. The repression of female desire and agency by the commodification of women is implicitly challenged by her hidden transgressions. Helen Talboys, the wife who was deserted, resists the label of fallen and successfully reinvents herself as the type of woman Sir Michael Audley desires. Despite not intentionally challenging middle-class dogmas, she nonetheless reveals their hypocrisy, and the tenuous nature of these codes used to subordinate women.[187]

Lady Audley, who is known for her golden-haired beauty, represents the genre in microcosm: her wickedness is hard to identify from her appearance, which enhances her ability to fascinate and threaten others. It is only through the detective's special skill that her character can be revealed.[188] Despite being depicted as pathological, criminal, abnormal, sexually deviant, and aggressive, Lady Audley is a danger to expose this bourgeois hypocritical double standard. Due to her low socioeconomic status, lack of social standing, and involvement in illegal activities, the *femme fatale* is often portrayed as a marginal figure, existing outside the realm of familiarity, order, and light. This narrative emphasizes a recurring subtext: the male detective must subdue the dangerous

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[186] J. Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: the Danger and the Sexual Threat,* cit., p. 116.
[187] *Idem,* p. 112.
[188] A. Cvetkovich, "Detective in the House: Subversion and Containment in *Lady Audley's Secret"* in *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism,* New Brunswick (New Jersey), Rutgers University Press, 1992, pp. 45-70, p. 46.

woman to reinstate male authority and patriarchal control. By unmasking, unveiling, and making clear the threat of the *femme fatale*, he proves himself to be a hero.[189] Interestingly, the detective's quest seems to be focused on investigating femininity rather than finding a solution to the mystery of George Talboys's disappearance. As soon as the detective misses his friend, he seems to search for the identity of his beautiful aunt, with whom he is confessing his love, rather than to find the missing body. Robert Audley's investigation throughout the novel outlines a construction of femininity that is based on a delicate reproduction of stereotypes, which the guilty woman has learned to handle carefully. Lady Audley's desperate attempt to conceal her identity is followed by a succession of carbon copies that lead into a feminine space filled with fraud and forgeries.[190] To gain the truth, Robert must learn how Lady Audley constructed a feminine image that is as fake as the metaphorical and stereotyped prose that makes her seamless image. The detective in sensation fiction and the popular penny dreadfuls of the 1860s, who punished dangerous women and subordinated domineering, assertive bourgeois women, figuratively reestablished order. Medical scientists in the nineteenth century explain that a woman's biological reproduction system can be classified as decent or immoral, similar to the man protagonist who obsessively investigates the femme fatale's sexual history and defines her as a dangerous woman.[191] Male detectives seek out clues that let them draw conclusions about a woman's character, regardless of her purity. For example, Lady Audley's sexual experience is hinted at by a gold lock of hair and a baby's shoe, which ultimately ties her to the disappearance of George Talboys, her first husband. Robert Audley diligently investigates the clues to uncover that Lady Audley is a mother, a bigamist, and a murderer. These methods for defining women or ascertaining their sexual histories are intended to enforce rigid social and economic boundaries in Victorian society.[192] Braddon's first *femme fatale*, Lady Audley – bigamous, murderous, and possibly insane – appears, at least on the surface, to be confined within the limits of proper

[189] J. Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: the Danger and the Sexual Threat,* cit., p. 110.
[190] L. Talairach-Vielmas, "Investigating Books of Beauties in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) and M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)", in *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels,* London, Routledge, 2007, pp. 113-132, p. 123.
[191] J. Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: the Danger and the Sexual Threat,* cit., p. 12.
[192] *Idem,* p. 13.

and respectable femininity. In an early descriptive passage, the feminine ideal is elaborated and celebrated:

> Wherever she went she seemed to take joy and brightness with her. In the cottages of the poor her fair face shone like a sunbeam. She would sit for a quarter of an hour talking to some old woman, and apparently as pleased with the admiration of a toothless crone as if she had been listening to the compliments of a marquis; and when she tripped away, leaving nothing behind her (for her poor salary gave no scope to her benevolence), the old woman would burst out into senile raptures with her grace, her beauty, and her kindliness, such as she never bestowed upon the vicar's wife, who half fed and clothed her. For you see Miss Lucy Graham was blessed with that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile.[193]

The reader is involved in shared assumptions about the nature of feminine fascination through the direct narrative address of this extract, which uses familiar, even banal, formulae for feminine charms. This passage, which continues in the same vein for some time, is a typical example of Braddon's descriptive technique, with an excess of description and an over-emphasis on Lucy's embodiment of the feminine ideal, which leads to her being the focus of the reader's attention. The discussion of *Lady Audley's Secret* revolves around the character who defies conventional expectations by appearing to be modest and innocent, but in fact, she has the "unfeminine assertiveness" needed to carry out bigamy, murder, and arson. It is argued that the female reader identifies with "a new kind of heroine, one who could put her hostility toward men into violent action". The novel's sensational mystery lies in the fact that Lady Audley is not insane or criminal but rather acts out of rational self-interest to safeguard her livelihood.[194] The "beautiful fiend" of *Lady Audley's Secret* is a unique combination of two distinct modern women: the literary governess and the Pre-Raphaelite model. When two men discover a hidden "pre-

[193] M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret,* cit., p. 11.
[194] A. Cvetkovich, "Detective in the House: Subversion and Containment in *Lady Audley's Secret",* cit., p. 48.

Raphaelite" portrait of Lady Audley, lending "a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes,"[195] their sight reveals an inner being hidden by her exterior beauty. These images quickly spread widely.[196]

Many Victorians focused solely on Lady Audley's monstrous actions, ignoring the reasons behind her behaviour. The main reason why Braddon's character was condemned was the contradictions between her delicate, feminine appearance and the cold-blooded selfishness of her actions. Lady Audley, in a variety of ways, manipulated cultural anxieties about women not being what Victorian ideology had defined them to be. Lady Audley's figure is not just a representation of a cultural moment, but rather a character that explores enduring fears and fascination. The theme of the woman who appears to embody the ideal male fantasy, yet whose apparent perfection conceals a monstrous and subversive femininity, runs throughout literary history and remains a potent myth to this day.[197]

It has been noted that innovation, particularly technological innovation introduced by a female character, is one of the defining attributes of sensation fiction. In this novel, technology, embodied through railways, telegraphy, and science, is presented as a distinctly feminized sphere. Lady Audley effortlessly travels to London, when necessary, orchestrates a burglary in her nephew's chambers, and catches the downtown train to Colchester within four hours. Lady Audley appears to be free from the tedious challenges of modern travel, and she is never shown sending a telegraph, perusing train timetables, missing trains, or even waiting for the late ones.[198] It's crucial to remember that Lucy's only occurrence of restlessly stirring is when Talboys describes her "with her baby in her arms".[199] Since then, her default state has been hyper-vigilance and constant alertness. Audley was asleep with a fishing rod in his hand near Audley's Court lake on the sunny afternoon when George Talboys went missing. In modernity, you cannot afford to be

[195] M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret,* cit., p. 65.
[196] J. E. Adams, "Crystal Palace and *Bleak House:* Expansion and Anomie, 1851-1873", in *a History of Victorian Literature,* Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, pp. 143-291, p. 202.
[197] A. M. Beller, *Mary Elizabeth Braddon: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction,* cit., p. 32-33.
[198] L. Lee. "Lady Audley's Secret: How *Does* She Do It? Sensation Fiction Technologically Minded Villainesses", in P. Gilbert (ed.), *A Companion to Sensation Fiction,* Oxford, Wiley, 2011, pp. 134-146, pp. 134-135.
[199] M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret,* cit., p. 21.

caught napping.[200] The mechanized world of 1860 enables Helen Talboys, the blue-eyed trickster with a notably complex past, to exploit the dislocations and disruptions of ultra-modern Victorian life, reshaping her identity at will. This means that, as Lady Audley, she can play the part of the compliant, angelic woman (the ideal domestic figure), while secretly plotting and orchestrating her "adventures" in the city with Phoebe Marks, certain that the external world, the public sphere, can be managed and controlled just as easily as her own home.[201]

Braddon received a level of visibility and power that was not available to most women in Victorian Britain's wider socio-medical-legal debates due to the story of Lucy Audley. Lady Audley's use of modern tools and transportation exposes a feminine structure that is based on profound contradictions. Despite her apparent freedom, women are forced to adapt to survive in a society that keeps them economically and socially subordinate. Braddon's heroine, as she confesses at the end, has been indoctrinated into the feminine ideal to an extreme extent, making his construction of modern femininity even more subversive. In fact, the heroine's acceptance of a feminine script that states that women have neither power nor financial means to live if unmarried is the reason why she falls off the tracks:

> I had learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other *every schoolgirl learns sooner or later* – I learned that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage, and I concluded that if I was indeed prettier than my schoolfellows, I ought to marry better than any of them.[202]

As feminist criticism has long observed, Lady Audley's first transgression, her bigamy, does not imply any uncurbed sexuality. Braddon, on the other hand, emphasizes the economic inferiority of women to men. Throughout the novel, she emphasizes the importance of choosing accessories that match the feminine ideal and enhance attractiveness as key to reaching marriage. Braddon creates a heroine who is made up of bits and pieces, focusing on collecting curious instead of men, and using extended and

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[200] L. Lee. "*Lady Audley's Secret*: How *Does* She Do It? Sensation Fiction Technologically Minded Villainesses", cit., p. 137.
[201] *Idem,* p. 139.
[202] M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret,* cit., p. xix.

sensuous depictions of her heroine's possessions as a subtext for any sexually charged subtext.[203] The heroine packing all her belongings before being sent away at the end of the novel demonstrates that women's economic position is closely connected to consumer culture. The novel highlights the heroine's vulnerable position in a male-dominated society, where women are denied any legal claim to wealth, even as she accumulates signs of prosperity. The definition of feminine identity and femininity was based on consumerism and was firmly rooted in mid-century Britain. While Lady Audley's crimes fulfil female readers' desires for rebellion and emotional expression, their sensational appeal in the story is also a result of a male fantasy about women's hidden powers. The narrative is primarily narrated from the point of view of Robert Audley, the nephew who becomes a detective to investigate his aunt's mysterious past. Lady Audley's inner life or point of view is rarely accessible through the narrative; instead, the sensationalism is derived from the descriptions of the haunting beauty that belies the heroine's criminal behaviour.[204]

One of the novel's more sensational scenes shows how powerful Lady Audley's image is, as Robert Audley and his friend George sneak into her private chambers, which have been locked since she has not been there. Their quest comes to an end with the chance to study the pre-Raphaelite portrait of Lady Audley that hangs in the antechamber. The text uses the painting's motif to show the heroine's new face: the light and childish angel in the house disappears to reveal the devilish creature hidden under heavy folds. On the surface, the portrayal of the other Lady Audley marks the turning point in George's disappearance, as it is at this moment that he uncovers his wife's deception. The room's composition suggests that Lady Audley is a reproduction of the feminine ideal. The position of the painting "in the centre of the octagonal chamber", and with "a faithful reproduction of the pictured walls"[205] as a background, plays with the layering of surfaces. As a result, Lady Audley's feminine beauty tends to be linked to an endless series of surfaces, framed by eight walls and numerous surrounding canvases. In addition to uncovering Lady Audley's fiery nature, the double motif also provides clues about the

[203] L. Talairach-Vielmas, "Investigating Books of Beauties in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) and M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)", cit., p. 122.
[204] A. Cvetkovich, "Detective in the House: Subversion and Containment in *Lady Audley's Secret"*, cit., p. 48-49.
[205] M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret,* cit., 64.

heroine's definition of the perfect lady. The painting's description suggests that femininity is constructed as a carbon copy, and the Angel in the House's disturbing aspect is based on the tension between uniqueness and copy.[206] The portrait serves as both an accurate depiction of the female character and a "cop[y] [of some] quaint medieval monstrosit[y]."[207] Yes, she is a villain, but she does not look like one.

The half-finished portrait of Lady Audley reveals the undercurrent that Braddon believed was inseparable from the feminine ideal. When that ideal is fully aestheticized – as it is by Braddon's anonymous pre-Raphaelite painter, and perhaps in male fantasies – it unveils dimensions unsuspected by Lady Audley's ordinary associates:

> No one but a pre- Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid lightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. […] It was so like and yet so unlike.[208]

Lady Audley's performance is impeccable, and she justifies her actions by stating that she is simply doing what women are trained to do when she utilizes marriage – in her case, more than once – to enhance her social and economic status.[209] Sensational women act independently, without needing men's approval or help.

The criminal identity of Lady Audley is based on the possibility of tracelessness. Lady Audley's Secret's fascination with lack of trace does not prevent it from being ambivalent about it, and the idea that some acts leave no traces is compared to the idea that a trace always remains. The novel holds a belief in a perfect crime but simultaneously demonstrates its impossibility. The detective narrative relies on a belief in traces (i.e., criminal evidence); therefore, at the climax of the novel's detective plot, it affirms that marks will be made, and traces will remain, regardless of any conscious intent. Lady

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[206] L. Talairach-Vielmas, "Investigating Books of Beauties in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) and M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)", cit., p. 125.
[207] M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret,* cit., p. 65.
[208] *Ibidem.*
[209] W. Hughes, "The Sensation Novel", cit., p. 262.

Audley leaves behind a trail of physical evidence that can only be deciphered with a committed reader's gaze. Lady Audley herself is marked by her deeds, her body becoming a piece of evidence. The bruise is the result of an act being committed and inevitably generating excess.[210] Mid-Victorian novelists and their extensive readership believed that women's secret activities, which were fantasized or feared, could pose a potentially devastating threat to the middle or upper-class home and hearth. Robert Audley, in Braddon's novel, understands that unmasking his uncle's wife will lead to the downfall of Audley Court and everything it represents. As he warns Lady Audley, he is prepared to ruin her home in order to protect it: "I […] shall level that house to the earth and root up every tree in these gardens, rather than I will fail in finding the grave of my murdered friend."[211]

Robert is apparently obsessed with female handwriting, so he seeks evidence in the form of a letter this time. Robert's understanding of Victorian codes of womanhood may be more dependent on his ability to comprehend the baize covering the accountancy desk. The place, as in the Pre-Raphaelite painting, conveys the association between women and money: the clue can be found in a series of bills and receipts, which again implies that women are valuable goods. So, he finds a letter that explains why Helen Talboys decided to leave her father and start a new life, interweaving the woman's handwriting with money. The hand that Robert recognizes ties the female character to a consumer culture in which a woman, in a sense, sells her body through marriage. When Robert finally sets off to "discover the history of the woman who lies buried in Ventnor churchyard"[212] not only does the final stage of his investigation confirm his hypotheses regarding Lady Audley's real identity and expose her wicked artifices, but it also demolishes the image of the domestic angel that the heroine has been misusing.

Lady Audley's last secret, which is also the reason for her other secrets, is her alleged insanity, which is said to have been inherited from her equally feminine mother. Braddon, like Collins, depicts female identity as radically unstable, but she does not portray it as passive. Lady Audley creates various identities and aliases, even insisting on her own identity as a madwoman, until her nephew finally confines her to a Belgian

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[210] E. Badowska, "On the Track of Things: Sensation and Modernity in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret"*, *Victorian Literature and Culture,* vol. 37, 2009, pp. 157-175, p. 170.
[211] M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret,* cit., p. 235.
[212] *Idem,* p. 214.

sanatorium under the false name of Madame Taylor. Instead of being labelled as unique or deviant, Lady Audley's intermittent madness is seen in the text as a universal human condition, one that even the hero or the reader cannot fully escape: “There is nothing so delicate, so fragile, as that invisible balance upon which the mind is always trembling […] Who has not been, or is not to be mad in some lonely hour of life? Who is quite safe from the trembling of the balance?”.[213] As Robert Audley, the amateur detective, starts to suspect his aunt of being a bigamist and murderer, he questions if he might not be suffering from monomania. As he attempts to identify her, he begins to feel like a criminal himself, even to the point of almost swapping places with the woman he smuggled out of the country, almost becoming a Gothic conspirator imprisoning her in his dungeon: “he felt as if he had carried off my lady, and had made away with her secretly and darkly”.[214] If all are subject to Lady Audley’s madness, Braddon suggested, might there not also be a potential for her crimes in each of us? As Braddon’s reviewers maliciously hinted, her scandalous plots were not so far removed from her own life; she too had a secret in her liaison with the publisher John Maxwell and their five illegitimate children. Maxwell's legal wife being confined in a lunatic asylum was a reality that was too painful to ignore.[215]

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, for instance, Lady Audley is the intruder whose irrational actions endanger the family: the novel ensures the family's safety by uncovering the secret of her past and sending her to a madhouse. The novel navigates the tensions between marriage as an economic contract and as an emotional bond, casting Lady Audley as a scapegoat for the threat to the stability of marriage and the family when either motive (financial gain or sexual desire) overrides the other.[216] Even Lady Audley’s literal confinement in a madhouse does not fully diminish the novel’s central role as a channel for women’s anger and fantasies of revenge.

Lady Audley and several other Braddon heroines share the shame of their unremarkable father and humble and impoverished family circumstances. She also adds another fundamental fear about her parentage: the fear that she may have inherited her

[213] *Idem,* p. 344.
[214] *Idem,* p. 336.
[215] W. Hughes, “The Sensation Novel”, cit., p. 271.
[216] A. Cvetkovich, “Detective in the House: Subversion and Containment in *Lady Audley’s Secret”,* cit., p. 51.

mother's insanity. The association between madness and femininity was pervasive in nineteenth-century culture, represented by this taint that was passed on from mother to daughter.[217] One of the key secrets in the narrative lies in the question of Lady Audley's madness: is she mad or is she simply clever and/or wicked? The novel's main plot consistently promises to uncover the hidden truth of its heroine/villain, and the woman, making the reluctance to finally uncover Lady Audley's mystery one of the main sources of narrative pleasure.[218] Lady Audley's character is characterized by her fear of her secret destiny, which adds an additional dimension to the determining conditions of a woman's life. Helen Maldon/Lady Audley's self-scrutiny habits, which she developed in response to her fears of inheriting her mother's madness, are an exaggerated version of the self-scrutiny imposed upon all women by prevailing ideas of the proper feminine.

Finally, as the novel reveals Lady Audley's ultimate secret, her madness, the female character is taken to a Belgian sanatorium, where the intensity of her passionate nature will be contained within "a great structure of iron and glass" and where women are reduced to mere shadows, "pac[ing] perpetually backwards and forwards before the window".[219] The sanatorium is like a medical Crystal Palace because it crystallizes transgressive womanhood and turns female display into male physiological observation. The sensational investigation as a quest for measuring and comparing is bolstered by the connection between detection and science. Lady Audley's escape from Victorian normative precepts is evaluated through pathological traces. The asylum represents the panoptical surveillance of women, putting an end to Lady Audley's circulation and emphasizing the physiological features of guilt like the mad circulation of blood in the heroine's veins.[220] Lady Audley's role as a transcendent antagonist is highlighted by the interplay of social control, mediated representation, and her male surveillance. Her experience reveals a more extensive condition of repression and female strategizing, which makes her a complex and ambiguous representation of Victorian femininity. Thus,

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[217] See E. Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980,* cit., pp. 72-73.

[218] L. Pykett, *The 'Improper Feminine': the Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing,* cit., p. 89.

[219] M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret,* cit., p. 328-329.

[220] L. Talairach-Vielmas, "Investigating Books of Beauties in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) and M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)", cit., p. 132.

Showalter argues that "as every woman reader must have sensed, Lady Audley's real secret is that she is sane and, moreover, representative".[221]

Braddon's exploration of unconventional womanhood does not end with *Lady Audley's Secret*. In *Aurora Floyd*, her next bestseller, Braddon continues this challenge to traditional norms by presenting a heroine who confronts scandal, secrecy, and societal expectations with boldness and resilience.

3.4 Boldness and Resilience in *Aurora Floyd*

Aurora Floyd, Braddon's subsequent bestseller following *Lady Audley's Secret*, tells the story of a charming but not conventional Victorian heroine who gets involved in a bigamous marriage and then a murder mystery, which brings scandal to her house and family. Braddon's portrayals of Lucy Audley and Aurora are deemed by critics to challenge the female fictional stereotypes of angels and demons.[222] Aurora Floyd is carefully constructed by Braddon in the novel as an independent and active young woman who consistently breaks Victorian feminine propriety standards. Often compared to Cleopatra, she is characterized by her sexual appeal that can be used to gain power over men, making her a frightening threat to male-dominated ideologies of marriage during the mid-nineteenth century.[223] The novel is among several texts published in *Temple Bar* that seek to promote an "active domesticity" for women, grounded in egalitarian marriage rather than the traditionally passive role linked to a (male-dominated) complementarian model.[224] Concerns about the potential corruption on the angel of the house were only fuelled by novels that made use of this uneasiness.

Aurora works on her own in her effort to rectify the mistakes of her past. Braddon creates a unique portrait of femininity for mid-Victorian readers by portraying Aurora this way. Marital happiness is not always hindered by the independence of women; in

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[221] E. Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980,* cit., p. 72.
[222] A. J. Robinson, "Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd"*, in Pamela K. Gilbert (ed.), *A Companion to Sensation Fiction,* Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 160-171, p. 161.
[223] K. Newman, "Temple Bar's New Portrait of Femininity: Active Domesticity in Mary Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*", *The Wilkie Collins Journal,* vol.16, 2019, < https://wilkiecollinssociety.org/temple-bars-new-portrait-of-femininity-active-domesticity-in-mary-braddons-aurora-floyd/ > Accessed. 17/05/2025.
[224] *Ibidem.*

reality, it has the potential to help it thrive. Braddon challenges the conventional notion of good and bad heroines, demonstrating that what appears innocent can be harmful, while what appears threatening can be unsettling. In other words, Braddon's Aurora portrayal flirts with the *femme fatale* figure that is prevalent in sensational fiction, but she still offers the chance of domestic happiness for such a woman.

Talbot represents the masculine ideal of Victorian domestic values, and his marriage proposal to Aurora aims to force Aurora to relinquish her autonomy in order to submit to his authority within their traditional, complementary marriage. This dynamic ultimately leads to the failure of their relationship, as such an arrangement would never bring about true marital happiness. In Talbot's view, there is no place for Aurora's "active domesticity," nor for her insistence on maintaining her independence and equality with her partner.[225] Active domesticity refers to a woman's ability to make decisions independently, without the supervision or guidance of a male guardian (usually her husband), and to pursue activities that extend beyond the domestic realm. At the end of *Aurora Floyd*, the reader is predisposed to support the marriage between Aurora and John, which is based on equality and trust, rather than male dominance and female passivity.

Aurora's mother Eliza Prodder is the first woman to be introduced. Though she is present only in the first chapter, her impact is felt throughout the novel, both through her absence as a mother and by serving as an example of the active domesticity within her marriage that Aurora eventually achieves. Even before her marriage, Eliza exhibited this type of active independence. As a thirty-year-old actress in the nineteenth century, a profession that could, ideologically speaking, raise doubts about her chastity, she might initially seem an unlikely marriage partner for a respectable, middle-class banker like Archibald Floyd. In fact, following their marriage, her neighbours maliciously label her an "artful, designing minx" and a "daring, disreputable creature."[226] The narrator ensures readers that the simple spirit of Eliza is not ruined by her sudden wealth. Her affection is rooted in steadfast gratitude, and therefore, the couple is "one of the happiest couples who ever wore the bonds of matrimony and changed them into garlands of roses".[227] Despite their disparities in social class and upbringing, their marriage is a perfect match for both

[225] *Ibidem.*
[226] M. E. Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 9.
[227] *Idem,* p. 16

partners. The narrator concludes her depiction of Aurora's mother by emphasizing that Eliza's angelic traits are not linked to her domestic life, but instead to her dedication to "her gardens, and pineries, and graperies, her dogs and horses, and her poor".[228] Eliza refuses to be seen as a "decorative wife," rejecting the traditional domestic role in favour of a more practical and active one.[229] This behaviour represents the first indication in Braddon's work of an ideal woman who not only fulfils domestic duties but also retains her independence and autonomy.

Braddon explores the challenges faced by wives in upper-middle-class or aristocratic families, focusing on how they must adapt to the roles expected of them by their husbands and society. Her novels consistently address the fear of a wife being seen by others, whether it is expressed by their husband to their family and neighbours or observed or spied on by servants or other household members.[230] Aurora's characterisation as both independent and domestic is defined by Eliza's absence. Four times in the novel, the word "motherless" is used to describe Aurora's follies, and Aurora is often referred to as a "motherless girl". Braddon uses Eliza's death to reduce Aurora's wildness, emphasizing that Aurora's wildness is a result of Eliza's absence and Archibald's subsequent grief. The narrator writes:

> We do not say a flower is spoiled because it is reared in a hot-house where no breath of heaven can visit it too roughly; but then, certainly, the bright exotic is trimmed and pruned by the gardener's merciless hand, while Aurora shot whither she would, and there was none to lop the wandering branches of that luxuriant nature.[231]

The women in Braddon's work are like the highly sensual female subjects of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, and they are presented as the object of the reader's rapt gaze. *Aurora Floyd* also emphasizes the staging of a particular version of the female for the eye of the

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[228] *Idem,* p. 17.
[229] K. Newman, "Temple Bar's New Portrait of Femininity: Active Domesticity in Mary Braddon's *Aurora Floyd"*, cit.
[230] L. Pykett, *The 'Improper Feminine': the Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing,* cit., p. 109.
[231] M. E. Braddon, *Aurora Floyd,* cit., p. 20.

reader. Aurora's mother is not a part of the narrative present of the novel, but she is nonetheless a powerful narrative presence that provides a way to represent and view the feminine that anticipates the heroine's presence:

> The banker's wife was a tall young woman, of about thirty, with a dark complexion, and great flashing black eyes that lit up a face, which might otherwise have been unnoticeable, into the splendour of absolute beauty.[232]

The text requires readers to pay attention to this flashing light, and the narrator encourages them to look admiringly at Eliza. Through the passage, the female body is addressed, and cultural awareness is invoked. The reader is given the responsibility of co-creating the spectacle.

> Let the reader recall one of those faces, whose chief loveliness lies in the glorious light of a pair of magnificent eyes and remember how far they surpassed all others in their power of fascination. The same amount of beauty frittered away upon a well- shaped nose, rosy pouting lips, symmetrical forehead, and delicate complexion, would make an ordinarily lovely woman; but concentrated in one nucleus, in the wondrous lustre of the eyes, it makes a divinity, a Circe.[233]

The speaking presence of the body in the text was a subject that was frequently discussed in sensation fiction. Generally speaking, sensation novels were considered impure for their tendency to focus on the female body. Their perceived transgression was a result of the intense physicality of their portrayal of the heroine.[234] Braddon's novels were criticized by reviewers due to their use of familiar physical traits and descriptions of the seductive feminine. Given the prominent nature of these formulas in her work, it can be concluded that they were also a significant source of pleasure for her readers. Observing Braddon's main female characters is a constant requirement for the reader. Aurora, for

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[232] *Idem,* p. 7.
[233] *Idem,* p. 7-8.
[234] L. Pykett, *The 'Improper Feminine': the Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing,* cit., p. 99.

instance, is first noticed (although it is not the first time she appears in the text) when she becomes the object of Talbot Bulstrode's captivated gaze, to whom she appears as, "a divinity! Imperiously beautiful in white and scarlet, painfully dazzling to look at, irresistibly brilliant to behold."[235]

The reader's gaze can be focused directly on Aurora or mediated through a male gaze, while at other times the reader observes Aurora in a more or less public spectacle. The scene that depicts Aurora's arrival at Mellish Park upon her marriage to its owner features many of these viewpoints:

> They [the Yorkshire servants] could not choose but admire Aurora's eyes, which they unanimously declared to be 'regular shiners;' and the flash of her white teeth, glancing between the full crimson lips; and the bright flush which lighted up her pale white skin; and the purple lustre of her massive coronal of plaited hair. Her beauty was of that luxuriant and splendid order which has almost always most effect upon the masses, and the fascination of her manner was almost akin to sorcery in its power over simple people.[236]

The passage progresses from displaying Aurora physically to the reader through the eyes of the Yorkshire servants to directly involving the reader in the spectatorship process. Simple people, like the servants, are bewitched by the character's feminine power, but the discriminating narrator is also intoxicated by the end of the passage: "I lose myself when I try to describe the feminine intoxications, the wonderful fascination exercised by this dark-eyed siren".[237] Aurora has possession of the text. Aurora Floyd, like Lady Audley, is constantly presented as a show, as a portrayal of power, pride, and beauty. The reader is repeatedly invited to participate alongside a character (usually a male character) in a voyeuristic observing of the unsuspecting heroine. For instance, when John Mellish finds his wife asleep in her dressing room:

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[235] M. E. Braddon, *Aurora Floyd,* cit., p. 33.
[236] *Idem,* p. 132.
[237] *Ibidem.*

> Aurora was lying on the sofa, wrapped in a loose white dressing-gown, her masses of ebon hair uncoiled and falling about her shoulders in serpentine tresses that looked like shining blue-black snakes released from poor Medusa's head to make their escape amid the folds of her garment.[238]

The heroine is depicted in the "sleeping-woman" pose, a pose that was widely popular among male artists during the later nineteenth century. She is portrayed by a word-painting that is typically sexualized in Braddon's novels from the sixties. This element of Braddon's melodramatic style, much like the paintings it imitates, provides a portrayal of woman as simultaneously "an object of erotic desire and a creature of self-containment, not really interested in, and hence not making any demands upon, the viewer's participation in her personal erotic gratification".[239]

Braddon's novels have a subversive potential thanks to the staging of the heroine as a spectacle, which destabilizes them significantly. The heroine typically plays a functionally transgressive role as either subject or agent within the narrative structure of a specific text. Narration accentuates the passive object of the text's gaze and places the heroine in a specular relationship with the reader, who, in turn, occupies a position of mastery vis-à-vis the heroine. On the other hand, the reader is constantly shifting power relations with the heroine as a result of the constant changes in point of view. The reader shifts from observing her as the subject of the text or narrator's focus to viewing her through the eyes of one or more other characters, to sharing their own perspective, or being influenced by the narrator to make a moral judgement or sympathize with her heroine.

The male gaze's dominance makes it unsurprising that readers are more informed about the thoughts of male characters than the eponymous heroine, even though the novel has an omniscient narrative voice. The shifting point of view, as Pykett points out, is complicated and makes Aurora both a passive object of a gaze and an active agent.[240] The degree of Aurora's agency can thus be elusive. Braddon is both a representative of male

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[238] *Idem,* p. 271.
[239] B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 69.
[240] See L. Pykett, *The 'Improper Feminine': the Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing,* cit., 102.

surveillance and one who challenges it, pointing out that Bulstrode gazes at Aurora and she gazes back.[241] As Nayder explains, Braddon is able to challenge the double standard of transparency for women but not for men through this "mutual gaze". Braddon's portrayal of characters watching each other in the domestic sphere emphasizes private spectatorship as a problem.

Aurora hesitates to divorce James Conyers mainly because she fears her private life would become a public spectacle. However, some anachronisms and factual mistakes in the novel raise doubts about whether she would have actually been able to get a divorce in the first place. Aurora's possible divorce from Conyers is mentioned multiple times throughout the narrative, but the Divorce Court only opened in 1858, so she could not have divorced him in 1857, which is the year she is supposed to have left him in the novel.[242] When Conyers begins working for John Mellish, he threatens to reveal his marriage to Aurora to the world, knowing that such a revelation would make a "nice bit of gossip for the newspapers!".[243] Aurora acknowledges the reality of Conyers' taunt and later informs Bulstrode that she didn't choose divorce to her "father's sake"[244], who would be distressed by the public's disapproval of her. Even though the truth about Aurora's bigamous marriage eventually comes out, her friends, particularly Talbot Bulstrode, do their utmost to suppress the gossip.

Aurora Floyd is depicted from the start as clearly breaking the boundaries of what was considered feminine. Her physical presence itself identifies her as embodying the improper, threatening feminine. Aurora, like her creator, knows many things that women are not usually exposed to. In Braddon's novel, the stereotype is presented in a paradoxical way that accentuates the culture's demon, the masculinized, unwomanly woman, as the desirable and desired feminine. Aurora's other attributes make her the opposite of an angel of the house. By engaging in masculine activities, such as horse racing, she consistently challenges this stereotype and finds herself in situations where her assertiveness clashes with male interests, causing her natural tendencies to seem distinctly masculine rather

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[241] L. Nayder, "'The Threshold of an Open Window'. Transparency, Opacity, and Social Boundaries in *Aurora Floyd*", in K. Harrison and R. Fantina (eds.), *Victorian Sensations. Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, Columbus, Ohio University Press, 2006, pp. 188-199, p. 195.
[242] A. J. Robinson, "Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd"*, cit., p. 168.
[243] M. E. Braddon, *Aurora Floyd,* cit., p. 283.
[244] *Idem,* p. 355.

than feminine. She was known as a “fast” woman because of her interest and boldness, a term commonly used by women in the mid-century who asserted themselves outside the home and took part in traditionally masculine pursuits.[245]

In the novel Aurora is often described as a "horsey" heroine or “horse-breaker” which is a slang for prostitute, but Dorré points out that Aurora is actually a horse when her husband names her “filly Aurora”.[246] Dorré argues that the narrative's portrayal of Aurora's taming and domestication resembles a "reenactment of the horsebreaking spectacle,"[247] a practice that became popular in the late 1850s and early 1860s. As a result, Aurora is often linked to this public display of control and strength, rather than the more conventional and desirable role of a private homemaker. Aurora's secret, as revealed in the rapidly unfolding narrative, is that she is actually a domestic and maternal woman behind her racial and seemingly criminal exterior. Aurora's story focuses on the gradual taming of the wild beast of an improper female.[248]

Braddon clarifies that Aurora cannot be described as either an angel or a demon, and she also demonstrates how she resists fully conforming to the role of a tragic heroine. Aurora fell ill for months because Talbot Bulstrode, Aurora's previous fiancé before John Mellish, broke off their engagement because Aurora refused to reveal her marriage to James Conyers. According to the principles of tragedy, Aurora "ought, no doubt, to have died of shame and sorrow after Talbot’s cruel desertion,"[249] but instead, she heals and gradually starts to develop feelings for John Mellish, who remains by her side throughout her convalescence. Talbot Bulstrode appears almost disappointed that Aurora survives losing him when he finds her happily married to another: “what a pitiful farce had the tragedy ended!”[250] At the start of the second volume of the novel, the narrator again calls her story a “real life drama”, referring to Aurora's marriage to John Mellish and Lucy's marriage to Talbot Bulstrode:

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[245] K. Newman, “Temple Bar’s New Portrait of Femininity: Active Domesticity in Mary Braddon’s *Aurora Floyd*”, cit.
[246] G. M. Dorré, “Horsebreaking and Homemaking: Horsey Heroines and Destabilized Domesticity in the Sensation Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon”, in *Victorian Fiction and the Cult of the Horse,* London, Routledge, 2016, pp. 63-94, p. 83.
[247] *Ibidem.*
[248] L. Pykett, *The ‘Improper Feminine’: the Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing,* cit., p. 88.
[249] M. E. Braddon, *Aurora Floyd,* cit., p. 127.
[250] *Idem,* p. 154.

> Now my two heroines being married, the reader versed in the physiology of novel writing may conclude that my story is done, that the green curtain is ready to fall upon the last act of the play, and that I have nothing more to do than to entreat indulgence for the shortcomings of the performance and the performers. Yet, after all, does the business of the real life-drama always end upon the altar-steps? Must the play needs be over when the hero and heroine have signed their names in the register? Does man cease to be, to do, and to suffer when he gets married?[251]

Aurora rejects the idea of dying tragically for love, opting for a happy marriage with John Mellish. However, the above passage ends with an ominous hint of trouble, suggesting that Aurora may eventually become a tragic heroine.

Aurora's relationship with Conyers in a cross-class way makes the domestic sphere vulnerable and transforms Mellish Park into a drama-ridden theatre. The domestic drama is a recurring theme in the novel as characters reflect on their respective roles.[252] Even though she is independent, Aurora has ethical aspirations: she wants to be married to a man who is respectable. Her elopement with Conyers is a mistake she openly admits and pays the price for. Her bigamy is committed accidentally because she believes Conyers is dead, and not through deliberate scheming. Although she exhibits the typical traits of a *femme fatale* (such as the darkness of her hair, eyes, and complexion, her assertive and at times aggressive attitude, and her fast reputation), she is, in the end, innocent of the novel's central crime: the murder of Jim Conyers.[253] Braddon's marriage narratives typically consist of a series of scenes of a marriage that is at risk due to secrecy and a lack of understanding between the partners. One partner's suspicions about the past or present secrets of the other is the most frequent narrative situation. In these narratives, marriage,

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[251] *Idem,* p. 163.
[252] A. J. Robinson, "Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd"*, cit., p. 163.
[253] K. Newman, "Temple Bar's New Portrait of Femininity: Active Domesticity in Mary Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*", cit.

which was once thought to be a place of union and mutual understanding, is revealed to be a state of mutual isolation, secrecy, and misunderstanding.[254]

In contrast to the motherless Aurora, Lucy is carefully nurtured by her mother and brought up to be the ideal wife: "Purity and goodness had watched over [Lucy] and hemmed her in from her cradle. She had never seen unseemly sights or heard unseemly sounds".[255] While Aurora studies *Bell's Life*, the sports paper, Lucy reads High Church novels, which are thought of as suitable reading material for young women. It is also suggested that the representation of Lucy's "angelic innocence" serves as a portrayal of her "dull-witted ignorance."[256] According to Jeni Curtis, Lucy is more aware than others, and it is Lucy who first discovers Talbot's love for Aurora.[257] Aurora Floyd's story and that of her virtuous cousin Lucy raise questions about the norms of respectable femininity. Lucy, like Braddon's transgressive women, is also a victim of the narrator's gaze, such as the agony of her initially unrequited love for Talbot Bulstrode. Bulstrode's dilemma between the charms of Lucy and Aurora serves as a focal point for examining both the limitations and strengths of the respected feminine and domestic ideal. His "ideal woman" is a powerful cultural stereotype:

> some gentle and feminine creature crowned with an aureole of pale auburn hair; some timid soul with downcast eyes, fringed with golden-tinted lashes; some shrinking being, as pale and prim as the mediaeval saints in his pre-Raphaelite engravings, spotless as her own white robes, excelling in all womanly graces and accomplishments, but only exhibiting them in the narrow circle of a home.[258]

Lucy is a perfect example of the domestic ideal, being exactly the kind of woman to make a good wife.

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[254] L. Pykett, *The 'Improper Feminine': the Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing,* cit., p. 110.
[255] M. E. Braddon, *Aurora Floyd,* cit., p. 48.
[256] A. J. Robinson, "Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd"*, cit., p. 162.
[257] See J. Curtis, "The 'Espaliered' Girl: Pruning the Docile Body in *Aurora Floyd*.", in M. Tromp, P. K. Gilbert, and A. Haynie (eds.), *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context,* Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, pp. 77–92, p. 87.
[258] M. E. Braddon, *Aurora Floyd,* cit., p. 40.

> But she was exactly the sort of woman to make a good wife. She had been educated to that end by a careful mother. Purity and goodness had watched over her and hemmed her in from her cradle. She had never seen unseemly sights or heard un-seemly sounds. She was as ignorant as a baby of all the vices and horrors of this big world. She was lady-like, accomplished, well-informed; and if there were a great many others of precisely the same type of graceful womanhood, it was certainly the highest type, and the holiest, and the best.[259]

Aurora Floyd aims to make this ideal seem duller than its alternative, Aurora, while also promoting it. It is not surprising to find Lucy as a common fictional stereotype in formulaic fiction like Braddon's. Braddon's awareness of using stereotypes is remarkable, as it highlights how specific genres (like types of stories) convey strong ideas or beliefs. From different angles, Braddon's novels examine the hypocrisies, self-deceptions, and repressions of the aristocratic or would-be aristocratic male, and the social codes they oversee.

Lucy, not Aurora, is the one who most closely represents a tragic heroine. Lucy's illness during the courtship of her cousin and Talbot Bulstrode was compared to the tragic end of Elaine of Astolat in Arthurian legend, who fell in love with Lancelot, in a case of unrequited love. In contrast to Aurora, who rejects the idea of dying for love when her engagement with Talbot comes to an end, Lucy actually longs for such a fate when it seems there is no future for her with the man she loves:

> So Lucy Floyd, having nothing better to do, nursed and made much of her hopeless passion. She set up an altar for the skeleton, and worshipped at the shrine of her grief; and when people told her of her pale face, and the family doctor wondered at the failure of his quinine mixture, perhaps she nourished a vague hope that before the spring-time came back again, bringing with it

[259] *Idem,* p. 48.

> the wedding-day of Talbot and Aurora, she would have escaped from all this demonstrative love and happiness, and be at rest.[260]

Although Bulstrode proposes to Lucy, her life remains tragic due to her inability to reveal her true feelings the way passionate Aurora does. Women like Lucy, as the narrator points out, are constantly in an unfavourable position: "They are always at a disadvantage. Their inner life may be a tragedy, all blood and tears, while their outer existence is some dull domestic drama of every-day life".[261] In this way, Lucy is a hidden tragic heroine, struggling with internal turmoil that is more evident in Aurora's life.

The novels of Braddon offer a variety of voices and perspectives on marriage and gender. The narrator repeatedly addresses the reader who understands about how marriage generally is in the modern world. Braddon typically uses the woman-to-woman address to present the reader as a feminine subject and a member of a community that shares emotions and values. This approach is employed in the address to negligent wives, which sets the stage for Aurora's situation.

> Ah, careless wives! who think it a small thing, perhaps, that your husbands are honest and generous, constant and true, and who are apt to grumble because your next-door neighbours have started a carriage, while you are fain to be content with an occasional airing in a hired fly,—stop and think of this wretched girl, who in this hour of desolation recalled a thousand little wrongs she had done to her husband, and would have laid herself under his feet to be walked over by him could she have thus atoned for her petty tyrannies, her pretty caprices! Think of her in her loneliness, with her heart yearning to go back to the man she loved, and with her love arrayed against herself and pleading for him.[262]

By putting the reader in a socially or sexually transgressive role and experiencing the frisson of having lost the benefits of loving a good man taken for granted by the ordinary

[260] *Idem,* p. 78.
[261] *Idem,* p. 160.
[262] *Idem,* p. 345.

bourgeois wife, such writing reinforces normative womanly virtues. The value of normal marriage is elevated by this confident pontificating, but it is destabilized by the specific situations in the novels and the use of multiple points of view. After Conyers' death, Aurora marries John Mellish, and once Hargraves is convicted of the murder, the domestic sphere is once again secure.

Aurora Floyd's transition from hidden transgression to concealed criminality was accidental rather than intentional, due to her inadvertent bigamy. *Aurora Floyd*'s transgressive heroines are believed by most critics to be the source of their power. Indeed, the transgressive nature of these heroines has received more attention from both contemporary reviewers and later readers than their criminality. This reinforces the notion that the bigamy novel was used either to develop the adultery plot in a displaced form or as a means of portraying a sexually active female character while adhering to the law and custom designed to regulate female sexuality.[263] The most significant debate among Victorian critics, and the ongoing interest among scholars, stemmed not from Aurora's bigamy, but from her iconic horsewhipping scene. The scene takes on a stage-like atmosphere, evoking the stillness of a tableau. Aurora is found by John Mellish whipping Steeve Hargraves in the stable after he had kicked her beloved dog. Contemporary critics described the scene as "revolting" and a "fatal mistake", while another argued that no lady of Aurora's social standing would have acted in the manner she is portrayed.[264] The scene, Tromp suggests, dramatizes not only a "husband's assault on his wife", but, more provocatively, Aurora's capacity to "strike back" against such violence.[265] In this moment, Aurora is once again breaking gender codes and behaving in an unfeminine way. In this short and potent scene, Braddon manages to portray numerous dangers that menace Mellish Park, particularly the unleashed female aggression and sexuality. Aurora's symbolic emasculation of her husband is the main focus of the horsewhipping scene, which appears to represent her dominance in the marriage.

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[263] L. Pykett, *The 'Improper Feminine': the Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing,* cit., p. 87-88.

[264] A. J. Robinson, "Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd"*, cit., 165.

[265] M. Tromp, "The Dangerous Woman: M. E. Braddon's Sensational (En)gendering of Domestic Law", in M. Tromp, P. K. Gilbert, and A. Haynie (eds.), *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context,* Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, pp. 93-108, p. 100.

The body plays an important role in these analyses of violence. Like Tromp, Andrew Mangham observes the frequent connection between women's bodies and violence, and he believes that the male imagination is the cause of the linkage between the two.[266] Aurora's transgression and violence make her a target of surveillance and gaze from others who watch her performance. The novel's conclusion suggests that Aurora will persist in her attraction to public spectacles, such as horseracing. Scholars discuss whether, despite the novel's dramatic storyline, Braddon brings the narrative to a more traditional close by depicting Aurora in the concluding paragraph as "little changed, a shade less defiantly bright, perhaps, but unspeakably beautiful and tender, bending over the cradle of her first- born".[267] Additionally, Aurora is almost completely absent from the story during the last third of the book; Jim Conyers' murderer is hunted down by male characters, which is a sign of the male's desire to suppress female sexual power. These more conservative choices and the novel's marriage-cantered ending not only cater to readers' desire for a happy ending, particularly one rooted in romance, but also serve to soften the more sensational elements of the plot, thereby maintaining the ideological assumptions of *Temple Bar*'s middle-class audience.[268] Tromp highlights the "tensions" in the conclusion but contends that, rather than yielding to societal norms, Braddon's novels "betray social contradictions," as demonstrated by the use of Aurora's maiden name in the title, which Tromp suggests signals the "discomfort" the text generates about the "shape of marriage."[269] By placing *Aurora Floyd* within its proper historical context, the ending can be seen as far from simply giving in to the male-centred views on marriage that were common in the middle of the century. It shows that a marriage where both partners share equal responsibilities can lead to true wedded bliss and familial affection.[270] Rather than feeling upset by the ending of *Aurora Floyd*, readers, both at the time and today, should see it as an example of marriage that's still worth pursuing.

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[266] See A. Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*, cit., p. 69.
[267] M. E. Braddon, *Aurora Floyd,* cit., p. 459.
[268] K. Newman, "Temple Bar's New Portrait of Femininity: Active Domesticity in Mary Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*", cit.
[269] M. Tromp, "The Dangerous Woman: M. E. Braddon's Sensational (En)gendering of Domestic Law", cit., 100-101.
[270] K. Newman, "Temple Bar's New Portrait of Femininity: Active Domesticity in Mary Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*", cit.

Braddon used sensation fiction to challenge the roles and expectations placed on women, and Wilkie Collins used the genre to expose deeper social contradictions. His narratives expand the critique beyond gender to explore issues of identity, power, and the body. The next chapter discusses how Collins's innovative approach unravelled Victorian ideals and introduced new, radical possibilities through mystery, subversion, and revelation.

Chapter 4

Shadows and Revelations: The Innovations of Wilkie Collins

4.1 Collins and His Challenge to Social Norms

Wilkie Collins was born in Marylebone, London, on 8th of January 1824. Harriet, his mother, came from a respectable but impoverished army family who had worked as a governess before marrying. He travelled with his family across Europe, specifically through Italy, where his father studied Renaissance art. While traveling, Wilkie often had to spend time alone or with his father due to minimal formal education.[271] William Collins, who was a well-known artist specializing in landscapes and genre painting, was his father. Collins, probably because of a difficult birth, had a skull deformation that led to a permanent bulge on the right side of his forehead; he was always sensitive about this and aware of his short stature, bad eyesight and abnormally small hands and feet.

Collins started sending anonymous articles and stories to lesser-known magazines, some of which were published. Collins' enthusiasm for Gothic novels was manifested in his first attributed story, *The Last Stage Coachman* (signed by W. Wilkie Collins), which was published in *The Illuminated Magazine* in 1843.[272] By then, he had already started a professional writing career by releasing three well-received novels: *Antonina* (1850), *Rambles beyond Railways* (1852) and *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.* (1848), a biography of his father that marked his symbolic entrance into literature because it was not just a personal tribute to his father, but also a demonstration of his literary talent and commitment to a writing career..[273] Collins' letter to Baron Ernouf reveals his internal tensions, particularly with his father. Despite exhibiting a work in 1849, he fails to consider following his father's footsteps in painting. The father's identity is based on values such as seriousness, respectability, and "Englishness," which Collins frequently

[271] G. Law and A. Maunder, "Collins's Education and Reading", in *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 1-18, p. 1.
[272] J. Bowen, "Collins's Shorter Fiction", in J. B. Taylor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 37-49, p. 43.
[273] G. Law and A. Maunder, "Collins's Education and Reading", cit., p. 3.

emphasizes with suspiciousness.[274] He contrasts this with his love for the freedom of living and learning abroad.

In 1852, he published *Basil.* While some reviewers were highly impressed by *Basil'*s style and narrative sophistication, others found it to be "vicious" and unwholesome.[275] *Basil* revealed not only Collins's ongoing fascination with the bizarre, but also a growing concern with the moral, legal, and sexual implications of marriage. Collins rapidly became an integral part of the staff of *Household Words*, a British weekly magazine founded by Charles Dickens in 1850 that focused on a wide range of topics, including serialized fiction, social issues, and practical advice for the general public. Collins had his first attack of what was called "rheumatic gout", which would continue to affect him for the rest of his life, leading to a reliance on laudanum in an ever-increasing amount to alleviate severe pain. Collins was likely suffering from Reiter's Disease, an autoimmune condition mostly affecting young men, which causes joint pain, inflammation of the urethra, and eye irritation, often due to a chlamydia infection.[276]

Wilkie Collins's career spans most of the second half of the nineteenth century, and he was both popular and prolific. He began in 1850, when Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Charlotte Brontë were at the peak of their careers, and George Eliot had not yet published her first novel, and ended in 1890, as the Victorian novel was coming to an end. Collins wrote over twenty novels, many short stories, and perceptive and witty pieces of journalism. During the 1850s and 1860s, he worked closely with Dickens and participated in dramatic productions together, as well as adapting his own work for the stage. As a professional writer, he worked hard and negotiated a rapidly changing literary market, able to utilize new forms of publication and distribution of fiction at both national and global levels.[277]

The private life of Collins was distinctly unconventional for his time. He never married but lived openly with Caroline Graves, a shopkeeper, and her daughter, whom he virtually adopted as his own. He also had a relationship with Martha Rudd, a woman of lower social status, with whom he fathered his first child about a year after they met.

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[274] *Idem,* p. 4.
[275] *Ibidem.*
[276] *Idem,* p. 2.
[277] J. B. Taylor, "Introduction", in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 1-6, p. 1.

While Collins, Rudd, and their children lived under the assumed family name of Dawson until his death, he remained in a close, unmarried relationship with Caroline Graves, who had a daughter from a previous marriage. Collins lived a nomadic life, never staying in one place for long. Collins's bohemianism was also impacted by the fact that he lived with two different women, leading to a series of coded words among his friends in their written correspondence about Collins's private affairs.[278]

Collins's writing career began to flourish due to his association with Charles Dickens. In 1851 the two authors met and remained close collaborators for several years. Their relationship is often seen as that of a teacher and student, with Dickens guiding his protégé on the demands of the literary world and how it affected a writer's time and energy.[279] Collins was writing almost continually. The 1859-60 saw the serialization, in *All the Year Round* – another weekly magazine founded by Charles Dickens – and publication in book form of Collins's greatest critical and financial success to date, *The Woman in White*. It was one of the most popular novels of the later nineteenth century.[280] Collins demonstrated that men, especially Count Fosco, were oppressors of strong women and exploiters of weak women. He demonstrated the inequity of the marriage laws and how a vindictive and unprincipled husband could victimize his wife without any concern about prosecution. Ann Catherick, Laura Fairlie's doppelganger, was used to demonstrate how easily an individual can be legally deprived of their identity. Finally, with Marian Halcombe, he created a heroine who defied literary conventions by being unattractive, yet, in contrast to the beautiful and passive Laura Fairlie, was strong-willed, clever, and determined. Collins used her as the model for the strong and sometimes criminal women in his later fiction.[281] Collins's second major success came with *The Moonstone* (1868), which moved away from the typical conventions of sensation fiction and is now considered one of the first true detective novels. His use of multiple narratives, often presented through diary entries or letters, to piece together the events surrounding the theft of the moonstone (a technique later widely adopted by detective fiction writers) was

[278] D. Martin, "Wilkie Collins and Risk", in P. Gilbert (ed.), *A Companion to Sensation Fiction,* Oxford, Wiley, 2011, pp. 184-195, p. 185.
[279] *Ibidem.*
[280] G. Dawson, "Wilkie Collins. Biographical Notes", *ProQuest Biographies,* Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2000, pp. 1-4, pp. 1-2.
[281] *Idem,* 2-3.

also groundbreaking. Like later detective fiction, *The Moonstone* was much more focused on males than its predecessors, without a strong female protagonist, but there were still concerns about women's issues. Collins handled the unrequited love of Franklin Blake's hunchbacked maid Rosanna Spearman with compassion in an age when servants were not seen or heard.[282] Collins experienced an increase in suffering from rheumatic gout after the 1870s and produced fewer works, which resulted in a significant decline in the quality of his output. Collins died on 23 September 1889 following a stroke, leaving his final novel *Blind Love* (1890) incomplete.

As anticipated, Wilkie Collins was "a model opium addict",[283] regularly taking copious amounts of laudanum himself to ease his rheumatic pains. Collins's novels contain a fear of racial contamination and pollution through drugs (especially opium), despite his praise for laudanum as a means of relieving his intense physical suffering. In fact, many of the characters linked to drugs in Collins' novels either come from foreign backgrounds or exhibit foreign traits. The villain of *The Woman in White*, Count Fosco, is from Italy and has a sugar addiction: Fosco is described as consuming sweets almost compulsively, a detail that adds complexity and originality to his portrayal. This quirk also serves to humanize an otherwise frightening character, creating a contrast between his refined behaviour and his dark nature. Among Collins' extensive oeuvre, *The Moonstone* is the work that most directly addresses themes of drugs and addiction. The story revolves around a diamond that is bequeathed to a niece by an opium smoker, stolen under its influence, and whose mystery is unravelled through its use by an addict. With its focus on narcotics, the novel also reflects Collins' own struggles, as he was a known user of opium.[284] Suffering from constant rheumatic pain and grieving his mother's death, Collins, according to his own account, dictated *The Moonstone* to his secretary while under the influence of such large doses of laudanum that, after completing the novel, he reportedly "did not recognise it as [his] own," although he was "pleased and astonished

[282] *Ibidem.*
[283] S. *Frühwirth,* "Dangerous Literary Substances: Discourses of Drugs and Dependence in the Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel Debates", in N. Roxburgh, and J. Henke (eds.), *Psychopharmacology in British Literature and Culture, 1780-1900,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 69-89, p. 83.
[284] *Idem,* p. 84.

at the finale".[285] As Louise Foxcroft pointed out, drugs in *The Moonstone* act "as a metaphor personifying the wider general anxieties of pollution, parasitic degeneration, and creeping corruption".[286] Almost all the characters linked to drugs are also associated with otherness, and through this, they pose a threat to the peace and tranquillity of the Verinder household. Ezra Jennings, a semi-autobiographical character and a habitual user of opium, is described as having a "mixture of some foreign race in his English blood"[287] threatens to reveal family secrets through his detective work. Franklin Blake's tobacco addiction, linked to his many foreign traits from extensive travels, leads to the theft of the precious gem. Meanwhile, John Herncastle, rumoured to be an opium smoker after spending years in military service in India, leaves the jewel to his unsuspecting niece, setting the stage for the novel's dramatic plot. Characters whose class status is ambivalent are typically linked to drug use in sensation fiction.[288] Sir Percival Glyde, one of the villains in *The Woman in White*, is a heavy drinker who pretends to be a baronet, though it is later revealed that he is the illegitimate son of his father and has no rightful claim to the title. However, not only villainous or criminal lower-class characters are portrayed as habitual drug users, but also positive characters are also included in this equation. For instance, although Gabriel Betteredge, one of the narrators of *The Moonstone*, is a devoted and loyal servant, he is also prone to multiple addictions. His addiction is further highlighted by his regular smoking of cigars and his reliance on his favourite novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, when making decisions. Although not as ruthless as Lady Audley, Lydia Gwilt, or Sir Percival Glyde, he still threatens the Victorian class system because of his role as a mediator between the lower- and upper-class members of the Verinder household. Drugs and the sensation novel share several similarities, which is why substances like opium or alcohol – "social evils" with well-established harmful effects – were an ideal metaphor for discrediting sensation fiction and its readers.[289] The rhetoric of drugs and addiction allowed reviewers to express a variety of concerns for the physical

[285] L. Foxcroft, "Interpretations of Nineteenth-Century Addiction: Fact and Fiction", in *The Making of Addiction: the 'Use and Abuse' of Opium in Nineteenth-Century Britain,* London, Routledge, 2006, pp. 39-59, p. 54.
[286] *Idem,* p. 58.
[287] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 359.
[288] L. Foxcroft, "Interpretations of Nineteenth-Century Addiction: Fact and Fiction", cit., p. 86.
[289] S. *Frühwirth,* "Dangerous Literary Substances: Discourses of Drugs and Dependence in the Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel Debates", cit., p. 86.

and mental health of the reader, as well as more distant anxieties, such as broader societal or moral fears about the long-term effects of addiction on culture and social stability. Frühwirth argues that the narrative surrounding drugs and addiction was associated with gender, class, and race, making it a versatile tool for addressing a wide range of concerns related to these social categories.[290] This demonstrates how deeply rooted such fears were in the collective consciousness of the Victorian epoch.

Britain was already experiencing significant economic changes that would affect the nature of book and periodical publishing when the sensational novel first appeared in the Victorian literary marketplace. The expansion and refinement of the railway, telegraph, and postal networks was a central element of these changes in everyday life. Suddenly, the faraway places seemed to be closer both literally and metaphorically. Tourism became a vital industry of modern life due to the democratization of travel, and the coordination of telegraphic communications connecting England, the Continent, and eventually the Americas. This is the world of the sensation novel – a world where advancements in communications and transportation opened up a new arena for emerging identities, criminal activity, foreign secrets, conspiracies, rumours, and scandals, all transmitted via the telegraph or arriving by train.[291] Collins was one of the most prominent novelists of the period, meeting the literary demands of periodicals, circulating libraries, and railway bookstalls, as well as the market law of demand and supply. Reading Collins's sensation novels of the 1860s reveals a series of fleeting narratives based on the continuous circulation and exchange of both bodies and information. Collins's novels are full of railway references, whether intended to create a sensation or simply to keep the plot moving. These include railway pursuits, misread timetables, public scandals between men and women in railway cars, and perhaps the most iconic event of all: the railway accident. Collins often uses railway travel in his novels as a symbol of social change, reflecting the growing sense of living in an age marked by risk and a seemingly endless series of accidents. Railways (along with steamships, circulating letters, and telegraphic messages) play a central role in Collins's storytelling. However, to view the characters who engage with these modern technologies as merely tools for displaying incidents misses the deeper significance of Collins's perspective on society. For Collins, technology

[290] *Ibidem.*
[291] D. Martin, "Wilkie Collins and Risk", cit., p. 188.

is not just a backdrop for random events; it serves as a lens through which he explores the complexities and tensions of the social world.[292] Collins's stories about modern life are preconditioned by the temporality of the railway network and the new narrative requirements of the timetable.

This integration of technology and narrative structure in Collins's work is further enriched by his collaboration with Dickens, whose influence helped shape the serialized novel's close relationship with periodicals. As a *Household Words* staff member, Collins developed his writing expertise. He worked with Dickens on popular Christmas numbers and other literary projects and contributed articles and short stories on a regular basis from 1852 to 1856, before becoming a salaried staff member in 1856. *The Woman in White* was Collins's major breakthrough in 1859, when *All the Year Round* gave him a chance to reach a large audience. His sensational writing style was influential on many authors of the period, and he became a household name with this novel.[293] The family magazine's potential to reach a mass audience was exciting to Collins, but he was also aware of the potential pitfalls of serialization. Weekly instalments of his novel *The Dead Secret* were published in *Household Words* in 1857. *The Dead Secret*, like *The Woman in White*, was a mystery story with sensational elements, but it was not particularly successful in serial form because of the lack of suspense. Collins made a mistake by revealing the mystery in the first instalment, which was unsuitable for sustaining the reader's interest in a novel over a few months. During the writing of his next serial novel for *All the Year Round*, he was careful not to make this mistake. The success of *The Woman in White* as a serial was based on his ability to craft a lengthy mystery into well-constructed instalments that met the demands of magazine readers for surprise and suspense. Collins took on the challenge, creating a plot that Wynne said was designed to "generate maximum suspense and confusion"[294] over the nine months it was serialized. Critics have credited the development of the story to the success of serialized novels in magazines, where each episode had to end in a way that made readers want to keep reading. This allowed the plot to unfold gradually through the revelation of important details, instead of relying on secrecy and a sudden conclusion. The strategic deployment

[292] *Idem,* p. 189.
[293] D. Wynne, "Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* in *All the Year Round"*, in *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, pp. 38-59, p. 40.
[294] *Ibidem.*

of multiple, sometimes conflicting first-person narrators was Collins's most famous innovation. By self-consciously writing, their collected narratives undermined the notion of omniscience or single trustworthy interpretation of events. The struggle for power in the novel is transformed into the struggle for the control of texts. For instance, in *The Woman in White*, Sir Percival secretly writes in the empty space of a marriage registry and attempts to coerce his wife into signing harmful legal documents. Anne Catherick writes anonymous letters and marks words on the sand. By shockingly violating Marian's private diary text, Count Fosco makes the reader realize that they are also spying on it with the villain. Hartright duplicates and then erases the text written on the tombstone.[295]

The psychological consequences of Collins's reluctance towards identity, substitution, doubles, and the shadow self-have also been discussed. Collins has been identified by critics such as Richard Barickman, Susan McDonald, and Myra Stark as a proto-feminist, passionate about women's rights and openly disapproving of Victorian socio-sexual conventions.[296] The primary source of criticism on Collins's fiction has always been his attention to plot construction. *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* are deemed prototypical of the mystery and detective fiction genres because of their provocative epistolary narratives. Collins frequently introduces a sense of suspense and epistemological uncertainty into the reading experience through his fiction.[297] Collins's critique of mid-Victorian society focuses on key issues such as the restrictions of marriage laws in England and Scotland, the fate of women who were socially stigmatized, and the problem of wrongful imprisonment. His novels also highlight the challenges faced by the disabled, including the blind and deaf, and critique the moral and legal systems of his time. Through his stories, he addresses these social injustices and questions the fairness of contemporary society.[298] Although Collins's early novels were provocative in their construction of suspense, his reviewers already recognized an overuse of improbable coincidences, even at this early stage of his career, despite his remarkable storytelling talent. Similar reviews would follow Collins throughout his career. Collins' reliance on

[295] Hughes, Winifred, "The Sensation Novel", cit., p. 269.
[296] See G. Dawson, "Wilkie Collins. Biographical Notes", cit., pp.3-4.
[297] D. Martin, "Wilkie Collins and Risk", cit., p. 185.
[298] *Ibidem.*

plot construction over insight into the human condition was a constant criticism in his watermark novels of the 1860s.[299]

Despite suffering debilitating pain from numerous ailments, Collins would continue to write at a great pace after the four great sensation novels of the 1860s. His novels from the 1870s and 1880s maintain his long-standing interest in stories about modern life, though their focus on themes of risk and accident is more restrained compared to the dramatic social critique found in *No Name* and *Armadale*. By the 1870s, the "sensation mania" was starting to fade, although, like any genre, its core elements remained popular and marketable in the literary world.[300] Collins's sensational approach to unstable or transgressive social identities, as well as disabled or deviant bodies, along with his unlikely storylines, can still be found in many of his later mission novels, such as *Man and Wife* (1870), *The New Magdalen* (1873), and *Heart and Science* (1883). However, these elements are toned down by his focus on advocating for social reform. The residue of sensation only serves as a tangential basis for the later novels that do not express any definitive social mission. Collins's fascination with fate and destiny was revisited in novels like *The Two Destinies* (1876), but the results were more domestic and dramatic than Armadale's crippling philosophizing of the interrelated forces of fate and accident. Collins would remain one of the most popular novelists in the period after the 1860s, despite not focusing on the interrelationship between storytelling and modernization in his four major novels. His most intense and socially powerful thoughts on the risky business of modern life would always be during the decade of sensation mania.[301]

Collins was interested in how the past and present are connected, and how the past can impact "civilized" Europeans.[302] He suggests that modern nations can move forward, but they can also move backward because of the consequences of past events. In his work, there are traces of the popular anthropology of cultural degeneration that emerged in the 1850s. Moreover, fears about humanity's animal-like traits, atavism, crime, and insanity are emphasized by a nightmarish view of the capital city. The city symbolizes a

[299] *Ibidem.*
[300] *Idem,* p. 194.
[301] *Idem,* p. 193-194.
[302] G. Law and A. Maunder, "Collins and London", in *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 61-81, p. 64.

civilization at risk from the rise of primitive forces and the hidden, repressed aspects of the unconscious mind.[303]

Collins's fiction was frequently seen by contemporary reviewers as dealing with the "Woman Question".[304] Collins deals with women's position in almost all of his works, including their choices, pressures, deviations from conventional standards of behaviour, sexuality, and relationships with men. Based on what is known about him, Collins was an unlikely figure to advocate for a more sympathetic understanding of women's roles in society. According to contemporary accounts, he led a hedonistic bachelor life, mostly revolving around the male-dominated social scene in London's clubs. His views on women's roles, ambitions, and responsibilities could be contradictory, sometimes radical or reactionary.[305] Collins dramatizes transgressive forms of female agency that challenge the traditional "language" and "ideas" used to understand, assess, and categorize such actions.[306] In Collins's novels from the 1860s, there are not only women who are memorable, but also women who challenge and exceed the language that surrounds and defines them. Collins's richest novels are based on a sustained interest in individuals who ultimately manage to resist almost irresistible social forces; I would add that they have succeeded in resisting debilitating social narratives.

It has been suggested by critics that Wilkie Collins's mixed attitude towards women – which includes showing sympathy for their limitations but sometimes reacting in a traditional or conservative way – may come from his personal relationships with women in his family and social life. Collins benefited more than most from the sexual double standards of his day, which quietly granted the freedom of men's sexual desires outside marriage. He sympathized with and exploited lone women.[307] His depiction of women, without a doubt, had personal meanings, but it also incorporated contemporary conventions. Significant changes occurred in the lives of women during the middle and later decades of the nineteenth century. In the 1860s, the rise of the "Woman Question"

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[303] *Ibidem.*

[304] G. Law and A. Maunder, "Collins and Women", in *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 82-100, p. 82.

[305] *Ibidem.*

[306] D. E. Hall, "From Margin to Centre: Agency and Authority in the Novels of Wilkie Collins", in *Fixing Patriarchy: Feminism and Mid-Victorian Male Novelists,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1996, pp. 151-174, p. 154.

[307] G. Law and A. Maunder, "Collins and Women", cit., p. 83.

involved debates about women's rights, such as the right to education, professional training, and to earn and keep their own money and property. It also covered women's right to be recognized as independent legal individuals, as British subjects, and to petition for custody of their children. Some people saw these discussions as a threat to the stability of Victorian patriarchal culture.[308] The issue of women was a hot topic for novelists of the time, with women being described as "monstrous", "prostitutes", and "emancipated women" who commit the "cardinal sin" of "unsexing" themselves by questioning the sacraments of marriage and motherhood altogether.[309] Collins's fiction explores many of these character types and story patterns, all of which were part of a broader uncertainty about modern identity. For example, in *Basil*, *Hide and Seek*, and *The Woman in White*, Collins seems to adopt a conservative male-gendered stance that is easily labelled as "patriarchal".[310] For instance, Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White* end up making do with less, but they are content in their decision. The novel clearly highlights the contradictions in the key mid-Victorian ideals of the "good" wife and mother. The mid-Victorian domestic ideal is characterized by Laura Fairlie as a passive, angelic, childlike, open-hearted woman. It is precisely because she follows this cultural ideal so strictly that she is unfit to survive in the modern world. Although Collins does not explicitly provide a proto-feminist critique of his society, like the outspoken women writers of the 1850s and 1860s, it's hard to read his work without noticing his unusual focus on the challenges women face.

Collins criticizes Victorian ideals of womanhood while also pointing out that knowledge of the urban landscape, as demonstrated in *The Woman in White*, becomes essential for navigating both personal and societal challenges. Collins's novels, like those of Dickens, engage with life in the city; at times, his work requires a familiarity with the topography of the urban landscapes he outlines, and he expects his readers to recognize key sites and even specific streets.[311] In *The Woman in White*, having a detailed knowledge of the city is crucial for the protagonist, Walter Hartright. As a young drawing teacher hired by Frederick Fairlie to tutor his niece, Laura (whom he predictably falls in

[308] *Idem,* p. 85.
[309] *Ibidem.*
[310] *Idem,* p. 86
[311] I. Middlebrook, "London Cabs, Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White"*, *The Journal of Transport History,* vol. 37.1, London, Bangor, Bangor University Press, 2016, pp. 1-14, p. 3.

love with), Walter becomes involved in one of the novel's most thrilling moments: escaping from Sir Percival Glyde's hired spies in central London:

> I looked at him as I passed, and instantly recognised one of the men who had watched me before I left England. […] Having done this, I again walked northward, till I reached the New-road. There, I turned aside to the west (having the men behind me all the time), and waited at a point where I knew myself to be at some distance from a cabstand, until a fast two-wheel cab, empty, should happen to pass me. One passed in a few minutes. I jumped in, and told the man to drive rapidly towards Hyde Park. There was no second fast cab for the spies behind me. I saw them dart across to the other side of the road, to follow me by running, until a cab or a cabstand, came in their way.[312]

Even before the cab clatters into the text, Collins stresses the importance of one's orienting abilities. By walking to the north, one can determine where it will lead (the "New-road"), then turn west, and so on. Collins tells us that if spies are to be evaded, Walter must exhibit an acute awareness of his surrounding environment, and a degree of caution, even if this does not allow him to return "till many hours later".[313] In other words, Collins's initial objective is to portray a observant and clever protagonist who is unable to escape because of the fortuitous presence of a cab. Walter's escape mirrors the first scene, where they search for the woman in white. In both cases, the failed pursuit is connected to Sir Percival, a manipulative man who uses the law and institutions like the asylum to control others. Using *The Woman in White* as an example, we it is possible to explore how the horse-drawn cab highlights social, sexual, and political tensions in Victorian society. The woman's body and her freedom of movement in urban spaces are closely tied to cabs, privacy, risk, and transparency. In fact, relatively well-off women who rode in cabs alone were looked down upon by the older generation, who associated the new, light, and fast

[312] W. Collins, *The Woman in White,* cit., pp. 455-456.
[313] *Ibidem.*

hansom cab with youth and disreputability. There is also plenty of evidence to suggest that crime and the dangers of using transport, especially at night, were a real concern.[314]

The relationship between characters and environments, which is a key element in Collins's writings in general, is also a striking presence in this early novel. Collins consistently chooses to set his stories around the clash of one of his protagonists (usually a young man) with a remote and unfamiliar location, a situation that is both physical and emotional. His readers receive not just the unknown, but also a new experience or a different perspective on something that may already have been familiar.[315] London is the main setting for several of Collins's novels. Collins's novel work in the first decade of his career can be exemplified through *Basil* (1852), *Hide and Seek* (1854), and *The Woman in White* (1860), which show his early attempts to challenge the boundaries of what was considered "proper" to mid-Victorian readers and reviewers.[316] London, the principal setting of each of these novels, was also the place where Collins lived and worked for most of his life. London was, for him, the perfect place where the energy of the city would allow his writing career to flourish. However, the author's books usually give us a dual perspective of the city. Collins's London may not possess the unique details and atmosphere of Dickens's, but it still exists as a distinct and meaningful environment. In particular, London has a reputation for being a stronghold of English civilization, but it's also prone to attack and personal danger. Some later novels, such as *Armadale* and *The Moonstone*, present this idea in a dramatic way. They begin in distant and unfamiliar places like the West Indies or India but then show how these events have unavoidable consequences in the heart of the modern world, which was thought to be safe and untouchable.[317]

Collins employs many of the conventions of gothic writing, including the frightening eruption of spectres of monstrosity. However, Collins's texts are different from the late eighteenth-century gothic novel, where horrific crimes and sinister plots are kept away by their exotic location. Collins's fictions, which have been labelled "urban gothic" by critics but are more commonly known as "sensation novels", portray the

[314] I. Middlebrook, "London Cabs, Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White"*, cit., p. 3.
[315] G. Law and A. Maunder, "Collins and London", cit., pp. 68-69.
[316] *Ibidem.*
[317] *Idem,* p. 61.

monstrous intrusion much closer to home.[318] When the mysterious woman in white taps Walter Hartright on the shoulder on the moonlit Finchley Road, he describes how "every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop".[319] Walter's initial reaction is one of blind terror, and then he becomes confused when he discovers that this young girl is not a streetwalker but a private lunatic asylum keeper on the streets of the city. The location of this persecution is not sixteenth-century Italy but nineteenth-century London. Collins achieved his own aspirations of a metropolitan life.[320]

Collins's novels show the tensions caused by the contradictions at the heart of the empire: many people felt that progress was bringing a modern world that went against old values like stability, integrity, patriotism, and morality. A common feature of *The Woman in White, Armadale, The Moonstone*, and similar works is their challenge to the Victorian ideal of steadiness. Collins deconstructed this idea by reinforcing the polemical energy of his early discourses on class, race, gender, and sanity. This process of dismantling was extended to modern science, religion, politics, and other socio-cultural fields that had their conceptual frameworks blurred with the affirmation of new imperatives. By doing so, he created a cumulative impact of relativization that had a diachronic significance to his early questioning of fixed boundaries and norms.[321] His works exhibit numerous figures and situations that demonstrate his relativistic approach to marginality and his continual challenge of hegemonic views. Despite being vulnerable to prejudice and self-contradiction, Collins was still able to explore the ways in which social forces shape and control individual identity. Less bold in challenging ideas about gender and class, though he still revealed their artificial nature, Collins was a true iconoclast when it came to breaking down moral and behavioural categories based on physical differences. His intriguing portrayal of foreigners, coloureds, mulattos, and disabled people, who play significant roles in his work, demonstrates this attitude. Collins intentionally strayed from the norm when describing corporeal features. Collins aimed to show how society creates and imposes fixed identities, turning people into representatives of specific groups or types. To counteract the deterministic effects of this process, Collins

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[318] *Idem,* p. 62.
[319] W. Collins, *The Woman in White,* cit., p. 20.
[320] See G. Law and A. Maunder, "Collins and London", cit., pp. 61-62.
[321] M. Costantini, *Venturing into Unknown Waters: Wilkie Collins and the Challenge of Modernity*, Pescara, Edizioni Tracce, 2008, p. 105.

developed several fictional characters that were at odds with Victorian models of beauty, health, and civilization. Costantini argues that in Collins's works, race itself is used as a broad metaphor for deviance, with its meanings constantly being revised and enriched.[322] Crossbreeding was seen by Collins as a source of energy instead of a threat, as he was fascinated by different forms of culture and identity. He predicted some theoretical aspects of twentieth century thinking by creating figures that incorporate binaries and blur their boundaries. The Victorians were experiencing a continuous, palpable discursive earthquake that is depicted in their literature, with the sensational images and responses that would be appropriate for such an event. This is especially evident in the works of Wilkie Collins, particularly in *The Moonstone*, where the reader encounters a growing awareness of the fluid and unstable nature of gender. This focus on unstable boundaries of identity is further explored in *The Woman in White*, where the mysterious plot becomes a vehicle for examining deep-seated Victorian anxieties.

4.2 Intrigue and Identity in *The Woman in White*

Through a mystery plot that focuses on gentlemen criminals' schemes and people being confined in lunatic asylums, Wilkie Collins's novel *The Woman in White* is designed to provoke a "nervous" response from readers. Collins's strategy for creating sensation was to make his readers feel uneasy by focusing on two crucial areas of middle-class anxiety: the vulnerability caused by inadequate physical and mental health, and the intrusion of crime into the genteel home. His literary sensationalism style was extremely successful, and the magazine *All the Year Round*, where the novel was first serialized, saw a surge in sales throughout its run.[323] *The Woman in White*'s instalments received a boost from Dickens' editorial skills, with articles and stories that echoed its themes of crime, danger, and nervousness. By reading *The Woman in White* instalments as a magazine serial, it becomes evident that Dickens and his sub-editor, William Henry Wills, had meticulously planned to provide adequate support for Collins's novel in order to enhance its sensational

[322] *Idem,* p. 144.
[323] D. Wynne, "Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* in *All the Year Round"*, cit., p. 38.

qualities.[324] Dickens and Collins, who were both familiar with the middle-class fiction market, worked together during *The Woman in White*'s serialization to accommodate the new interest in sensational narratives. *The Woman in White*'s instalments were provided with a suitable environment that included other features from various authors on crime, detection, health, and safety, which aligned with the novel's preoccupation with these issues. In order to support Collins's serial, Dickens provided his own contributions.[325] Critics did not always approve of Collins's techniques as a serial novelist, despite his popularity with the common reader. Collins used the absence of immediate explanation for a mystery as a major element in *The Woman in White*.

Poor health and nervousness are connected in *The Woman in White*, with many characters falling ill, usually as a physical response to their disordered mental states when they are wracked by fear, guilt, anger, or worry. *All the Year Round* was a source of support for the novel's preoccupation with illness and nervousness, as almost all the characters in the novel are at some point ill. *All The Year Round* brought together fiction and factual accounts of nervous disorders and poor health, possibly confirming contemporary medical theories that suggested that the pace of modernity was causing the middle classes to be nervous and weak, making them "unfit" to survive the pressures of the 1860s.[326] *The Woman in White's* concern for poor health, specifically "poor nerves", can be interpreted as a response to Victorian medical theories that suggested that both mind and body were affected by the turbulence and disorder of modern life. As Wynne observes, there was a widespread perception that the "disorder of the outer world was paralleled by […] bodily fragility within".[327] Evidence of this confusion appears in *The Woman in White*, where the "nervous" aristocratic men (Glyde, Fosco, and Fairlie) are linked to theories about nerve degeneration. In contrast, the virtuous, middle-class Walter Hartright only briefly suffers from a mild case of "nerves" before he recovers and continues with his intense detective work. *All the Year Round* emphasized the issue of poor health in a different way than by referring to debilitated nerves and full-blown insanity during the run of *The Woman in White.* Dickens's magazine also reminded readers that middle-class people's bodies were just as vulnerable. Collins's dramatic

[324] *Ibidem.*
[325] *Idem,* p. 41.
[326] *Idem,* p. 44.
[327] *Ibidem.*

portrayals of nervous shocks, palpitations, and anxiety were accompanied by other features designed to provoke similar reactions in readers regarding accidents.[328]

The Woman in White and *All the Year Round* offered sensational representations of nervous debilitation and disaster and images of crime. Middle-class anxieties about criminality were centred around the notion that an outwardly respectable criminal would infiltrate and undermine the genteel home. Collins's novel, like all subsequent sensation novels, was structured around the interaction of crime and family life. Sensational fiction often depicts criminals as educated and upwardly impostors rather than from the working class. In the nineteenth century, this literary type was a recent innovation, indicating the changes in how criminality was being represented.[329] This new crime literature focused not on the conflict between the people and powerful, often oppressive authorities, but on the struggle between two pure minds: the murderer and the detective. Victorian novels, along with newspapers and journals, became a new medium for presenting crime, its detection, and the offender's punishment.

Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* established a new subgenre of the novel, one that emphasized sensation. Despite not being officially referred to as a sensation novel when it was published in 1860, *The Woman in White* is now recognized as an exemplary of the genre. It appears that a work is considered sensation fiction not because of the number of sensational incidents but because of their frequency and importance in the plot.[330] Real events and crimes often inspire sensational plots, and Collins's are no exception. *The Woman in White*'s origin was traced back to a letter Wilkie Collins received about a potential wrongful confinement in a mental asylum. This theme prompted him to explore the concept of identity substitution, inspired by a French legal case. His idea was to use the asylum as a powerful narrative tool to facilitate this deception. Collins developed his characters with this central concept in mind. He specified that the victim should be a woman, and to make her more appealing, she had to be a lady of high social status. Her double, on the other hand, had to come from a lower social class. He needed a strong villain to oppose them, which led to the creation of Count Fosco, a complex, foreign antagonist. He also introduced a secondary villain, Sir Percival

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[328] *Idem,* p. 49.
[329] *Idem,* p. 50.
[330] E. Langland, "*The Woman in White* and the New Sensation", in P. Gilbert (ed.), *A Companion to Sensation Fiction,* Oxford, Wiley, 2011, pp. 196-207, p. 196.

Glyde, portrayed as a vulnerable accomplice with a shameful past, including illegitimacy and an attempt to forge official records. These character ideas and main plot points were set before Collins chose the story's structure. After that, he introduced the multiple narrators, mainly Marian Halcombe and Walter Hartright, and refined the story to keep the suspense high, starting with Hartright's frightful encounter in the night.[331]

Hartright's decision to become a detective does not affect his reputation as a gentleman. Criminal acts in *The Woman in White* are remarkably free from state intervention. Glyde's forgery is never officially uncovered by the authorities, and the only legal representatives Collins presents are the Fairlie family's lawyers, who prove ineffective in both preventing and exposing the criminal schemes. The lack of effective law enforcement gives Hartright the freedom to go after the villains, but he avoids the dishonourable act of turning them over to the police. This is because both Glyde and Fosco die violently without him having to get directly involved. In Collins's novel, the problems of social control, particularly the policing of domestic life, are easily omitted, with the amateur detective work, along with the processes of punishment and reward, being firmly set in the private realm of family secrets.[332] Collins's Count Fosco exists in both the respectable world and the criminal world, which are usually seen as completely separate and opposites. Fosco's ability to transcend gender roles matches his ability to bridge social divides. The love Fosco has for fine, colourful clothes and bons-bons suggests that he has similar feminine tastes. As Marian says, "his movements are astonishingly light and easy. He is as noiseless in a room as any of us women […] he is as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us".[333] Fosco is also skilled at disguising himself, changing his appearance completely to avoid the revenge of the Italian brotherhood he betrayed: "the shaven face, […] might have been covered by a beard in Pesca's time; his dark brown hair might be a wig; his name was evidently a false one".[334] Even his identity is concealed through the fabrication of his immense corpulence. Count Fosco is not worried about his treachery, referring to his spy duties as "diplomacy" and "delicate political missions".[335] As an Italian aristocrat, Fosco's punishment is losing his social

[331] *Idem,* p. 197.
[332] D. Wynne, "Wilkie Collins's *The Woman* in *White* in *All the Year Round"*, cit., p. 55.
[333] W. Collins, *The Woman in White,* cit., p. 222.
[334] *Idem,* p. 593.
[335] *Idem,* p. 614.

status and dying as an ordinary man. This is a fitting punishment for someone who supported an oppressive aristocracy and tried to strip others of their nationality, as well as Laura and Anne of their identities. Wynne argues that Fosco is the first "super-criminal" in English fiction, an educated genius whose clever plots require an equally clever detective to unravel.[336] His ideas on crime have created a legacy for future fictional super criminals. The Italian aristocrat Count Fosco has a past shrouded in mystery. His obesity, love for sweets, white mice, and small birds, along with his foreign background, suggest a deeper corruption. In a significant detail, Collins places the events of his novel just before the 1851 Exhibition, which brought many foreigners to England and created a space where people from different classes could mix. The exhibition touches upon issues of nationality and class. Certainly, the Count's ambiguous origins and impoverished state raise suspicions about his actual rank and class. His "foreignness" is unquestionable, and his influence over the women he meets unleashes tensions that can only be suppressed by his exposure as a traitor and his brutal death.[337]

Wilkie Collins's remarkable and distinctive literary achievement in this work is due to his seemingly intuitive comprehension of sensation over a subject that was influenced by unsettling coincidences, forgeries, seductions, kidnappings, insanity, wrongful imprisonment, murder, and the imminent possibility of violence. Sensation also has a distinctive tone and technique in its most effective manifestations. Even though sensation fiction is set in familiar, domestic environments (unlike genres like Gothic novels), right from the start of the book – even before anything major happens – readers sense they are in a different world, separate from everyday realism. The omniscient narrator makes only a brief appearance, setting the stage for the novel's multiple narratives.

The novel begins with a summative and somewhat hyperbolic sentence: "This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and of what a Man's resolution can achieve",[338] setting up a series of oppositions: woman/man, patience/resolution, endure/achieve. Later, the narrator's emphasis on procedure, highlighting evidence and reason, brings to the forefront their opposites: intuition, emotion, and the uncertainties they create. While the initial division of roles appears simple and superficial, the novel

[336] D. Wynne, "Wilkie Collins's *The Woman* in *White* in *All the Year Round"*, cit., p. 57.
[337] E. Langland, "*The Woman in White* and the New Sensation", cit., p. 205.
[338] W. Collins, *The Woman in White,* cit., p. 5.

dramatizes the reversal of these roles, showcasing both a man's patience and a woman's resolution. Marian Halcombe is very different from her half-sister, Laura Fairlie. Marian is dark and resourceful, while Laura is fair and helpless, acting more childish. The contrasts are starkly highlighted by Walter's introduction of the two women. In Walter's initial impression, Marian stands with her back to him, and he becomes captivated by "rare beauty of her form […] her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat".[339] He observes her "easy elegance"[340] as she approaches him, then notices that "the lady is dark"[341], and soon realizes that "the lady is young"[342], before ultimately concluding:

> … with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express, The lady is ugly! […] The lady's complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. […] Her expression – bright, frank, and intelligent – appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete.[343]

Walter's observations create several uneasy tensions: Marian as a masculine woman, Marian as a rebellious woman, and Marian as a sexual woman. These tensions suggest the possibility of unlawful sexual desire, fuelled by her unconventional nature despite being a respectable woman. Walter's depiction of Marian's physical body shows his immediate sexual attraction, but he is enraptured by Laura, who is portrayed as both sexless and disembodied: "The woman who first gives life, light, and form to our shadowy conceptions of beauty, fills a void in our spiritual nature that has remained unknown to us till she has appeared".[344]

Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White* is widely regarded as a memorably powerful character. In a story with a fractured narrative and many different voices,

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[339] *Idem,* p. 31.
[340] *Ibidem.*
[341] *Ibidem.*
[342] *Ibidem.*
[343] *Idem,* p. 32.
[344] *Idem,* p. 50.

Marian's is a steady, calm presence, always reasonable even in difficult situations. She serves as the heart of the novel. She is notable for her series of first-person narrations that follow the early revelations of Walter Hartright, the novel's hero. This progression is worth noting. The reader feels similar sensations as Walter's nervousness and confusion early in the novel, as he is trapped in a society that is the essence of the novel's "sensationalism".[345] Walter's narrative ends with "blinding tears"[346] of helplessness. The novel creates a void that Marian effectively fills by enveloping the reader in sensations of confusion and incapacity, creating a void of reliability and narratorial capability. Collins's novel concludes with a different outcome, where empowered women and non-patriarchal men will share a happy and anxiety-free future after effective collaboration with their calm and resourceful female partners.

As Hall suggests, the women of the mid-Victorian period were "strong, sensible, and practical".[347] *The Woman in White* is a novel that relies on women, so there are no clear-cut lamentations to find. Marian indeed has all of these qualities. The part of her diary that the readers have access to starts with the sentence: "This morning Mr. Gilmore left us".[348] Her narration is characterized by plain and undramatic words, which make it distinct from Walter's. Marian relates facts with care and consistency, and hers is the most significant among a series of forceful and lucid female narrations in the novel. Eliza Michelson, the housekeeper, continues the story with a remarkable simplicity and logic after Count Fosco's language arabesques. Her words are followed by those of Hester Pinhorn, a cook, who gives her testimony in a calm and steady manner, a style also seen in Mrs. Catherick's narration. All of these women move the story forward by speaking in ways that are considered especially "unfeminine", directly confronting the men who describe a woman's voice as "shrill" or a "cackle".[349] The admiration of other characters is a result of Marian's communicative force and ability. Count Fosco lauds her diary:

> […] these pages are amazing. The tact which I find here, the discretion, the rare courage, the wonderful power of memory, the accurate observation of

[345] D. E. Hall, "From Margin to Centre: Agency and Authority in the Novels of Wilkie Collins", cit., p. 156.
[346] W. Collins, *The Woman in White,* cit., p. 127.
[347] D. E. Hall, "From Margin to Centre: Agency and Authority in the Novels of Wilkie Collins", cit., p. 157.
[348] W. Collins, *The Woman in White,* cit., p. 163.
[349] D. E. Hall, "From Margin to Centre: Agency and Authority in the Novels of Wilkie Collins", cit., p. 157.

> character, the easy grace of style, the charming outbursts of womanly feeling, have all inexpressibly increased my admiration of this sublime creature, of this magnificent Marian.[350]

It is possible that this praise could be viewed as reprehensible because it effectively dismisses Marian as stylish and inconsistent. However, Count Fosco's reference to "womanly feeling" should not be overemphasized, as Marian controls her emotions for most of the novel. While the Count's comments about Marian's courage and discretion seem accurate, his labelling her as "charming" reveals more about him than about her. Many of the men in the novel try to impose restrictive gender roles on the women, who, both directly and indirectly, show how hollow these traditional Victorian views of women's roles are.

The novel itself, as frequently pointed out by critics such as Nina Auerbach, is stereotypical in many of its own references to women. But I would add, *The Woman in White* often goes beyond its own language, even though that language clearly reflects the influence of a Victorian, patriarchal writer. This ambiguity is most apparent in the section where the reader is first introduced to Marian. It is a long passage in which Marian is described as a typical "spinster" of the era. Walter tells the reader:

> The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form and the unaffected grace of her attitude. Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; well-developed, yet not fat. […] She left the window – and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps – and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer - and I said to myself, […] The lady is ugly! […] [Her] complexion was almost swarthy, with dark down on her upper lip, almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair. […] Her expression – bright, frank, and intelligent – appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete. To see such a face on a perfectly shaped figure, yet to be almost

[350] W. Collins, *The Woman in White,* cit., p. 343.

> repelled by the masculine form and masculine look of the features in which the perfectly shaped figure ended – was to feel a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep, when we recognise yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream?[351]

It is evident that Collins was raised in a patriarchal culture and his portrayals were influenced by a binary notion of gender. The discursive parameters of their culture were unavoidable limitations for Victorian writers. Marian embodies both beauty and ugliness, masculinity and femininity, softness and hardness; she defies categorization and transcends polarized labels. The repetition of the words "yet not" and "almost" is telling, as it indicates how Marian constantly approaches and challenges boundaries. Language cannot capture who she is; the typical Victorian labels do not explain her. The novel's adaptation of Marian is even more noteworthy because of the discursive limitations it demonstrates. Although she is strikingly unconventional, she only surprises at first meeting; after that, the text hardly mentions her appearance. Certain gender norms are subverted by Marian, who is both easily accepted and relatively not condemned. Her ability to embrace so many different traits challenge the reader to accept her differences, just as Walter eventually does.

Marian may appear annoying due to her tendency to put herself down, but in reality, she is highly intelligent, capable, and hardworking. Through her actions, she demonstrates that society actually creates differences between men and women, based on the idea that certain roles are "natural". Even if she quietly questions them, Marian still has to accept and follow these rules. Marian's narration sometimes makes this explicit. When she finds it difficult to sleep, she muses:

> If I only had the privileges of a man, I would order out Sir Percival's best horse instantly, and tear away on a night-gallop, eastward, to meet the rising sun – along, hard, heavy, ceaseless gallop of hours and hours, like the famous highwayman's ride to York. Being, however, nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats for life, I must respect the

[351] *Idem*, pp. 31-32.

> house-keeper's opinions, and try to compose myself in some feeble and feminine way.[352]

Masculine power and freedom are a "privilege" in this context, not a natural trait or divinely inspired right. Gender conventions effectively confine women, limit their activity, and render them "feeble", resulting in Marian being "condemned" to femininity. By repeating (and criticizing) the word "patience" from the opening sentence, Marian challenges the narrator's clearly sexist statements, showing that while her patience has limits, her determination seems limitless.

Anti-patriarchal women in *The Woman in White* must deal with complications caused by abusive men.[353] In fact, a woman's obedience to patriarchal expectations almost results in tragedy when Marian's sister, Laura, chooses to marry the cruel Sir Percival. Collins portrays Marian's voice as a voice of reason and authority as she warns Laura: "you are so much better off as a single woman".[354] This statement feels believable, as the novel has already shown plenty of signs of Percival's questionable intentions. Still, Laura follows the male perspective and, even though she does not love Percival, chooses to honour her late father's wishes and the pressure from her fiancé. The novel anticipates Percival's eventual imprisonment of Laura in an insane asylum, which highlights the worst consequences of patriarchal theory: the ownership of women who are completely dehumanized. In a complete change from previous Victorian depictions, women are required to work together to combat the evil committed by selfish, authoritarian men, which is permissible by law and convention.[355]

Laura is also coming to participate in what is considered a feminist rebellion. After her marriage, she realizes the severity of her mistake and works to prevent her husband from appropriating her property. When Percival orders her to sign a document she cannot read, she just refuses and "turn[s] her back on him in dead silence".[356] Female determination is effective in preventing potential patriarchal abuse. Percival argues that she should sign because "what have women to do with business? I tell you again, you

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[352] *Idem,* p. 200.
[353] D. E. Hall, "From Margin to Centre: Agency and Authority in the Novels of Wilkie Collins", cit., p. 161.
[354] W. Collins, *The Woman in White,* cit., p. 215.
[355] D. E. Hall, "From Margin to Centre: Agency and Authority in the Novels of Wilkie Collins", cit., p. 161.
[356] W. Collins, *The Woman in White,* cit., p. 250.

cannot understand it"[357], but his attempt to enforce this limiting stereotype is countered by the women. Marian and Laura work together to "shake Sir Percival's resolution, and to make him suspect that we two women understood the laws and obligations of business as well as himself".[358] Although Percival and Fosco end up faking Laura's death and locking her in an asylum to steal her money, the women's actions shake the resolve of the men. Throughout the story, in my view, the sympathies lie with the abused wife and her friend, whose beliefs against patriarchy are shown to be completely justified. I think this reflects the idea that their opposition to the unfair treatment of women is fully supported by the events in the narrative. In fact, the novel shows that anxiety is completely justified for abusive patriarchs who will eventually be exposed and punished for their actions. *The Woman in White*'s consistent undermining of binary notions of gender is supported by the signs of such anxiety. For example, Marian notices Sir Percival's obsession with maintaining domestic order:

> If I take a book from the library and leave it on the table, he follows me and puts it back again. If I rise from a chair, and let it remain where I have been sitting, he carefully restores it to its proper place against the wall. He picks up stray flower-blossoms from the carpet, and mutters to himself as discontentedly as if they were hot cinders burning holes in it, and he storms at the servants if there is a crease in the tablecloth, or a knife missing from its place at the dinner table.[359]

Marian is supposed to be responsible for domestic matters in accordance with standard Victorian gender ideologies, but Percival is actually the neurotic housekeeper; his obsessiveness is a reflection of his anxiety about losing control of his domain, which he has only barely and fraudulently maintained. Marian is not referred to as a domestic goddess, but she is nonetheless a superior being. Although the final scene clearly shows a heterosexual resolution, it does not take away from the novel's focus on the strong collaboration between the women, as Laura and Marian stand together, holding the baby.

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[357] *Idem,* p. 247.
[358] *Idem,* p. 255.
[359] *Idem,* p. 217.

The image is a reflection of modern ideology and the oppressive relationship between women and domesticity, but it also shows unexpected forms of accommodation.[360]

A similar contrast to the one between Laura and Marian can also be found between the two Italians: Pesca and Count Fosco. The sense of disruption and unease that Collins's sensational technique is based on is amplified by this as well. As portrayed in the story, the two men, like Marian and Laura, are physical opposites. Walter informs us that "Without being actually a dwarf […] Pesca was, I think, the smallest human being I ever saw, out of a show-room".[361] Passion, impulsiveness, rashness, and emotionality are all traits of his personality. On the other hand, the count is "immensely fat"[362], self-controlled, discrete, patient, and analytical. Although Marian notes that the Count is "as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us [women]"[363], his sensitivity, which seems exaggerated, is actually a way for him to control and manipulate those around him. Even though Fosco is usually calm and in control, he is afraid of the small man: "A mortal dread had mastered him, body and soul," Hartright tells us, "and his own recognition of Pesca was the cause of it!".[364] The small man, ironically, becomes the fulcrum to unseat the big man and expose the full conspiracy at the end.

The plot is made up of both class conflicts and gender tensions. At the beginning of the novel, Walter, a poor drawing teacher, has no hope of marrying the rich heiress Laura Fairlie. She is destined for aristocracy. But the man who marries her, Sir Percival Glyde, is actually an impostor. He made up his parents' marriage records to steal a title that is not his. Although Collins's plot appears at first to show a corrupt aristocrat being replaced by a good, middle-class professional, the story becomes more complicated when it is revealed that the man trying to join the aristocracy is not actually of noble birth. Once Sir Percival is freed from the Count's constraints, his uncontrolled temper and intemperance become a sign of his doom. An inherent corruption is reflected in his illegitimacy.[365]

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[360] See E. Langland, "*The Woman in White* and the New Sensation", cit., pp. 200-201.
[361] W. Collins, *The Woman in White,* cit., p. 7.
[362] *Idem,* p. 220.
[363] *Idem,* p. 222.
[364] *Idem,* p. 585.
[365] E. Langland, "*The Woman in White* and the New Sensation", cit., p. 204.

These social and identity dynamics then intersect with broader themes such as empire, science, and the construction of femininity, which take centre stage in Collins's next novel *The Moonstone*.

4.3 Empire, Opium and Subversive Femininity in *The Moonstone*

The Moonstone was originally published under the title "The Serpent's Eye" and was serialized in *All the Year Round* from January to August 1868. It was the last time Collins contributed to the magazine while Dickens was alive. He determined that success was achieved by giving the public what it desired. He seems to have accomplished what he set out to do with *The Moonstone*, and the novel has been widely regarded as Collins's most sophisticated and accomplished work. The novel is both gripping and insightful, logical and confusing, tautly plotted yet also complex. It covers a wide range of topics from the 1860s: empire, science (including mesmerism, hysteria, somnambulism, and trances: theories of the unconscious and dreams), drug use, gender, ecology, the criminal body, the role of the literary critic, and the act of reading.[366] The story is simple at first: the Moonstone diamond is stolen from Rachel Verinder, the main character. Her love interest, Franklin Blake, takes on the role of the hero. He asks everyone to tell "the story of the Moonstone […] as far as our personal experience extends, and no farther".[367] Blake is the one putting the story together, and much of the novel is told from his point of view. He is determined to solve the mystery. The novel's detection process becomes more elaborate than simply searching for the diamond. Anne-Marie Beller argues that "detection is a necessary quest to find the truth, meaning, and stability", while detection is not "merely concerned with finding out the truth about others, but more crucially about oneself".[368] The process evolves into a trajectory of self-discovery with Blake in charge of detection. The mystery turns out to be a narrative about Blake's transformation from hero to thief, due to his contradictory sense of self. Nevertheless, he is incapable of discovering his identity alone. Blake's identity shift is mediated by the covert power held

[366] J. B. Taylor, "Introduction", cit., p. 6.
[367] W. Collins. *The Moonstone,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 8.
[368] A. M. Beller, "Detecting the Self in the Sensation Fiction of Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon", *Loughborough University Journal,* vol. 26, no.1, 2019, pp. 49-61, pp. 50-51.

by women from higher and lower classes, such as Rosanna Spearman and Rachel Verinder. It is their withholding of information from the public sphere that maintains Blake's identity as the hero, and their subsequent reveal of information in private that alters his identity, for both the reader and himself, to a thief. Although the main focus of the text is on the protagonist's ability to detect the mystery, the newly revealed information changes both the character's and reader's perspectives in a new state.[369] The investigation process can reveal hidden personal details about the characters involved, even if there is a tangible mystery to solve. The book uses eleven narrators and thirteen stories to build a strong structure. It's set in a remote country house, which represents England. The suspects all live there, the evidence is all circumstantial, and the detectives are quirky and disruptive. It also focuses on the growing science of forensic investigation and finding clues, which helped shape the detective genre we still see today. *The Moonstone*, which is technically confident and carefully crafted, has been regarded as Collins's highest achievement. As he revealed in his letters, he spent all of his intellectual and physical energy on writing it. He incorporated various literary traditions, such as the epistolary novel, the satirical novel, and the colonial adventure story. It is also full of symbolism and, it combines the light entertainment of mystery or romance with a sharp and critical social commentary.[370]

The Moonstone has been interpreted as proof of Collins's reflection on colonial policies, but there is disagreement among scholars about how much the author departed from mainstream Victorian ideologies. Due to the presence of multiple narrators and witnesses, *The Moonstone* presents conflicting perspectives on British and Indian relations, which causes the internal focus on events to expand. Some scholars have attributed Gabriel Betteredge's racial views to Collins due to the length of his narratives.[371] Betteredge is a passionate admirer of *Robinson Crusoe* and frequently refers to Defoe's novel to express his discriminatory views. His distrust of all foreigners and the contrast between how he sees himself (as a master like Crusoe) and the actual role he plays (as a servant, like Friday) are key to understanding the irony in his character. Lillian

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[369] S. Wildman, "Covert Female Power Mediating Identity in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*.", *Footnotes 12*, 2019, pp. 59-67, p. 60.
[370] J. B. Taylor, "Introduction", cit., p. 6.
[371] M. Costantini, *Venturing into Unknown Waters: Wilkie Collins and the Challenge of Modernity*, cit., p. 163.

Nayder argues that through Betteredge's parodied self-representation, Collins "subtly reworks Defoe's novel in order to challenge the authority of this text – to loosen the hold its imperial ideal had on Victorian readers".[372] The author developed strategies to articulate his polemical discourse on the colonial venture, despite the fact that most of the fictional events in The Moonstone occur in Britain and the Indian setting is limited. The synecdochical use of the diamond as an emblem of India is worth considering among these strategies. The transference to Britain and its subsequent theft are two means of telling a story of crimes committed by Englishmen of rank. The first story, contained in the Prologue, is set during the siege of Seringapatam (1799), that reverses the implications of the Mutiny. The violence of the colonizers against the Indians is shown through the actions of John Herncastle, an official who steals the Moonstone from the imperial palace after killing the guards:

> I got to an open door, and saw the bodies of two Indians (by their dress, as I guessed, officers of the palace) lying across the entrance, dead.
> A cry inside hurried me into a room, which appeared to serve as an armoury. A third Indian, mortally wounded, was sinking at the feet of a man whose back was towards me. The man turned at the instant when I came in, and I saw John Herncastle, with a torch in one hand, and a dagger dripping with blood in the other. A stone, set like a pommel, in the end of the dagger's handle, lashed in the torchlight, as he turned on me, like a gleam of fire.[373]

The Moonstone's transportation to Britain reinforces the criminalization of conquest. Rachel wears the gem at her birthday party, but it mysteriously disappears the next night. The police officer, Sergeant Cuff, searches for it without success. With help from Dr. Ezra Jennings, Cuff finally solves the mystery of the theft. Despite his inability to trace the diamond, he discovers that it was taken by Franklin Blake and Godfrey Ablewhite, two of Herncastle's descendants, and then recovered by three brahmins who had set out to restore it to the Hindu deity. Although Blake's crime can be partially excused due to

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[372] L. Nayder, "Robinson Crusoe and Friday in Victorian Britain: 'Discipline,' 'Dialogue,' and Collins's Critique of Empire in *The Moonstone", Dickens Studies Annual,* vol. 21, 1992, pp. 213-231, p. 215. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44364570. Accessed 07 June 2025.
[373] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 4.

his unconsciousness (he stole the diamond while under the influence of opium), the second theft is more concerning due to its involvement in a seemingly upright young man, Ablewhite. However, his corruption and hypocrisy are brought to the fore in the novel's conclusion. After being blamed for the theft, his dead body is found in mysterious circumstances, turning him into a mockery of the racist ideas suggested by his name:

> He traced with his finger a thin line of livid white, running backward from the dead man's forehead, between the swarthy complexion, and the slightly-disturbed black hair. 'Let's see what is under this,' said the Sergeant, suddenly seizing the black hair, with a firm grip of his hand. [...] 'He's pulling off his wig!' whispered Gooseberry, compassionating my position, as the only person in the room who could see nothing.
>
> There was a pause — and then a cry of astonishment among the people round the bed.
>
> 'He's pulled off his beard!' cried Gooseberry. [...] 'Come up here, along with me, sir! He's washing off his complexion now!'[374]

According to the sensational passage quoted, the Sergeant shows that the sailor with dark skin and a black beard suspected of theft is actually disguised as Ablewhite. A white person, pretending to be a criminal from a different race, is found guilty of crimes typically associated with black people, reflecting the racial tensions and stereotypes of the Victorian era.

Blake's and Ablewhite's guilt is only revealed through the detective's investigation, which counteracts the restitution of the stolen gem to India and the detective's failure to restore peace and order. The remarkable modernity of *The Moonstone* is demonstrated by all of these textual elements.[375] Critics interested in gender issues may argue that the way this story connects colonial and patriarchal oppression is what makes it interesting. The feeling of disturbance in *The Moonstone* is made stronger by the dark view of family life presented in the story. The home is both a place of safety and danger, with unstable and

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[374] *Idem,* p. 435.

[375] M. Costantini, *Venturing into Unknown Waters: Wilkie Collins and the Challenge of Modernity*, cit., p. 166.

shifting boundaries. Behind the outward appearance of a peaceful family, jealousy and passion simmer, threatening even the most comfortable domestic situations. In its context, *The Moonstone* takes advantage of the horror caused by a real-life scandal – the notorious "Road" murder of 1860.[376] In both The Road Murder and *The Moonstone*, there are hints that someone living in the house is responsible for the crime. The local police conduct poor investigations, and a Scotland Yard detective arrives, focusing more on finding a stained nightdress than solving the case. The similarities between the two stories are evident, but it is the differences that are the most revealing, especially the way Collins's use of the Road Murder seems to be a bloodless fictionalization.[377] As Mangham points out, the most noticeable difference between The Road Murder and Collins's fictional version is the change in the central crime from murder to theft. This, he argues, was Collins's way of making his story less disturbing compared to the original crime. Even though he is often credited with creating the sensation genre, Collins, according to Mangham, had an aversion to the personal violence involved in murder.[378] In the widely discussed case, Constance Kent, a sixteen-year-old girl, was alleged to have killed her four-year-old brother by slicing off his throat and pushing him down the family privy. The police investigation also cantered on the mystery surrounding a bloodstained nightgown. The interrogation of a young middle-class girl was met with public outrage, but there was also a curious interest in the domestic details of the family. After confessing in 1865 and facing trial, Kent only managed to avoid death by having her death sentence commuted to life imprisonment by Queen Victoria.[379] Examining the novel closely, it is easy to comprehend why recent critics have emphasised the connections between *The Moonstone* and the Road murder. Collins's novel is clearly about secrets. Like the Road Murder, it focuses on hiding the family's role in a crime, which was common in a time when respectable women were expected to keep things secret. Bloodshed is strongly associated with the Moonstone from the start of the novel. After all, it is inserted into the handle of a dagger that was intended to kill its three guardians. The jewel may have a particularly vengeful effect on the cast of characters in the text, as it marks a trail of deaths

[376] A. Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*, cit., p. 79.
[377] *Ibidem.*
[378] *Idem,* p. 80.
[379] G. Law and A. Maunder, "Collins and Women", cit., p. 96.

through the narrative. Instead of avoiding the personal violence of murder, the Moonstone (the dark centre of the novel) seems to represent death and destruction.[380]

The jewel has "a defect, in the shape of a flaw, in the very heart of the stone"[381], which reminds us of how women were often seen at the time: beautiful on the outside but deeply flawed on the inside. The gem's central fault causes the diamond to be more valuable as a commercial commodity when cut into smaller jewels:

> The flawed Diamond, cut up, would actually fetch more than the Diamond as it now is; for this plain reason – that from four to six perfect brilliants might be cut from it, which would be, collectively, worth more money than the large – but imperfect – single stone.[382]

The diamond is associated with Victorian ideas of female nature when it is described as defective, multifaceted, and potentially fragmented. As the novel progresses, Rachel, the diamond's owner, develops a close symbolic relationship with it and becomes increasingly hysterical. Betteredge describes her, as "possessing a host of graces and attractions" yet, like the diamond, he believes she "had one defect", which he identifies as her having "ideas of her own".[383]

This link between identity and otherness continues with the figure of Ezra Jennings, whose physical appearance and mixed heritage make him a target of suspicion and marginalization, just as Rachel and the diamond challenge Victorian norms and expectations. Ezra Jennings is an outsider who finds it challenging to survive in a society that is prejudiced:

> His complexion was of a gipsy darkness; [...] His nose presented the fine shape and modelling so often found among the ancient people of the East, so seldom visible among the newer races of the West. […] From this strange face, eyes, stranger still, of the softest brown [...] looked at you, and (in my

[380] A. Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*, cit., p. 80.
[381] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 36.
[382] *Idem,* p. 37.
[383] *Idem,* p. 51.

> case, at least) took your attention captive at their will. Add to this a quantity of thick closely-curling hair, which, by some freak of Nature, had lost its colour in the most startlingly partial and capricious manner. Over the top of his head it was still of the deep black which was its natural colour. Round the sides of his head [...] it had turned completely white.[384]

He is described as "a freak of Nature" and is disliked by most people, resulting from a cross-breeding that he is ashamed of:

> "You have not always been in England?" I said.
> "No. I was born, and partly brought up, in one of our colonies. My father was an Englishman; but my mother – We are straying away from our subject, Mr Blake; [...]"[385]

Jennings is not allowed to be part of both the desired centre and the margins. Collins depicted a doctor of mixed-race descent with admirable qualities, contrary to many Victorian ideas about race and education. Always willing to help others, Jennings also has a sharp intellect, which, according to the beliefs of the time, was strangely at odds with his exotic background on his mother's side. Due to his odd physical contradictions - he appears to be both old and young, Oriental and European - his incarnation of various humanism is most evident in his epistemological method, which is half-rational and half-intuitive.[386] Collins worked hard to create an impressive image of hybridity that revealed the limitations of the Victorian mindset. As someone who faces discrimination but also holds superior knowledge, Jennings challenges the myths of the British Empire, which claimed to bring justice and civilization to its colonies.[387]

Jennings presents imperial-minded Victorians with an alternative to their established truth, while simultaneously being one of them, and working within their scientific framework. Also, within the highly symbolic world of *The Moonstone,* Jennings

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[384] *Idem,* pp. 312-313.
[385] *Idem,* p. 358.
[386] M. Costantini, *Venturing into Unknown Waters: Wilkie Collins and the Challenge of Modernity*, cit., p. 229.
[387] *Idem,* p. 230.

himself can be seen as a symbolic figure and a good starting point for exploring the key themes of opium, Empire, and Sacrifice, which he seems to represent. And, as Mark Mossman notes: "[Jennings] has the ultimate detective ability [and] is the character most likely to discover the 'truth' or the reality".[388] He is literally full of opium and clearly consumed by it: the visible signs of early aging – "innumerable marks and wrinkles" – the wasting-away of his face, and the unusual "dreamy" look in his eyes all serve as evidence of this.[389] The sudden change in his hair colour from black to white could be a result of his opium addiction. Jennings's "dreamy" eyes, "deeply sunk in their orbits", that look out and take "your attention captive at their will"[390], suggest the character's authority. In the novel, the "Tincture of Opium"[391] is an agent of truth, further linking his transformation to the influence of the drug. Mr. Candy, a doctor who is slightly clumsy but also a kind-hearted employer and benefactor of Jennings, shares Jennings' belief in the benefits and healing properties of opium: "Mr Candy [...] told [Blake] that his nerves were all out of order; and that he ought to go through a course of medicine immediately".[392] Candy's following actions indicate that he is most likely talking about opium, and his perspective is reflected in the current medical profession. The dying Jennings himself states as follows: "The one effectual palliative in my case is-opium. To that all-potent and all-merciful drug, I am indebted for a respite [...] from my sentence of death".[393] Here, the condemned man praises one of his executioners, which is a good example of the typical nineteenth-century admiration for laudanum.

In a similar way, Blake's character is also shrouded in mystery, with much of what is known about him coming through the perspectives of others. Despite Blake's voice becoming the most familiar to the reader (as it takes up a significant portion of the narrative), the reader still knows very little about him. Betteredge provides the majority of information about him, including his extensive education in countries like Germany, France, and Italy. Betteredge notes that "[Blake] had come back with so many different sides to his character, all more or less jarring with each other, that he seemed to pass his

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[388] M. Mossman, "Representations of the Abnormal Body in *The Moonstone*", *Victorian Literature and Culture,* vol. 37, 2009, pp. 484-500, p. 493.
[389] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 312.
[390] *Ibidem.*
[391] *Idem,* p. 400.
[392] *Idem,* pp. 67-68.
[393] *Idem,* pp. 367-368.

life in a state of perpetual contradiction with himself".[394] Betteredge describes Blake as a construct of his various experiences, never settling on a single disposition, despite his multiple experiences contributing to a cohesive and well-versed character. He further states that Blake "wrote a little; he painted a little; he sang and played and composed a little – borrowing, as I suspect".[395] Blake's identity is defined by "borrowing" from the cultures he was exposed to instead of integrating his experiences into his own self. Blake's character is described as enigmatic and constantly contradictory, which reflects his later oppositional identity shift from hero to thief.

The Moonstone, like *The Woman in White*, focuses on women's choices, their desires, and their behaviour while trying to reach them. Rachel Verinder, described as "dashing" and "stiff-necked"[396], is the character in this story who best represents assertive modern womanhood.[397] However, the novel also features other female characters, such as Miss Clack, an evangelical hypocrite who clings to others. Her name seems to be a reference to noisy chatter, and through her own account of events, we learn about her sexual repression and her longing for the powerful, blonde preacher Godfrey Ablewhite. Rosanna Spearman is a lonely maidservant, disfigured by having one shoulder larger than the other. Tormented by her repressed desire for Franklin Blake, she ends her life by drowning in the Shivering Sands, a deceptively calm stretch of wasteland that can suddenly "move and shudder", pulling people down into its "fathomless depths"[398] to their deaths. Lady Verinder, the mother of Rachel, acknowledges her role as a mother and recognizes her social and other superiority over others. Mrs Ablewhite "a large silent, fair-complexioned woman […] never known to do anything for herself […] accepting every- body's help, and adopting everybody's opinions".[399] I argue that the majority of the text's debates are based on Rachel's relationship with these women, or lack of it. Rachel and Miss Clack have different opinions about women's prescribed behaviour.

The novel's emphasis on sexual frustration and conflict reinforces the notion that it is a text focused on women.[400] The novel's unconscious and uncanny elements (embodied

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[394] *Idem,* p. 42.
[395] *Idem,* p. 15.
[396] *Idem,* p. 51.
[397] G. Law and A. Maunder, "Collins and Women", cit., p. 97.
[398] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 298.
[399] *Idem,* p. 234-235.
[400] G. Law and A. Maunder, "Collins and Women", cit., p. 96.

in the Shivering Sands) have been widely discussed. The novel has been viewed as a Freudian and feminist text due to the idea that the title, a diamond, is linked to women and sexuality.[401] In turn, it's easy to see that Rachel's love for Blake is both sexual and spiritual, resulting in the most important personal conflict in the novel. Her desire for Blake is subversive because, first, he's not a good match for her, and second, it's the woman who is the one longing for him.[402] The whole novel is filled with images that show how Rachel's calm and controlled appearance hides not only her knowledge of the crime but also an inner struggle. She's dealing with complex decisions about her sexuality, morals, and lifestyle, as well as repressing her desires because of a sense of duty, something often seen as typical of the Victorian era.[403] I think she demonstrates that she is not the "masculine" man-hater, but rather a woman who struggles to conform to traditional feminine emotions. The heroine is unable to express what she knows and feels.

Rachel and Rosanna's covert power to conceal evidence in *The Moonstone* allows them to manipulate the story and mediate Blake's identity. Rosanna and Rachel play a direct role in Blake discovering that he is the thief. The reader and Blake are unaware that Rosanna holds the only physical evidence that proves Blake stole the Moonstone. Blake was portrayed throughout the text as the nobleman who was determined to find justice for Rachel before the discovery of Rosanna's information. Blake's perception of heroism by other characters and, more importantly, himself was due to Rosanna's withholding of information from the public.[404] Blake's image as the hero completely falls apart when he returns to the Verinder house after a break in the search, and Betteredge tells him, "Rosanna Spearman left a sealed letter behind her – a letter addressed to you".[405] She gave it to her friend Lucy. Rosanna's refusal to share the letter with others and her decision to only trust it to her female friend (who is also confined to her home) emphasizes the significance of sharing her knowledge privately with only Blake.[406]

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[401] A. D. Hutter, "Dreams, Transformations, and Literature: The Implications of Detective Fiction", *Victorian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1975, pp. 181–209, p. 200. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3825911. Accessed 13 May 2025.

[402] See G. Law and A. Maunder, "Collins and Women", cit., p. 98.

[403] A. D. Hutter, "Dreams, Transformations, and Literature: The Implications of Detective Fiction", cit., p. 201.

[404] S. Wildman, "Covert Female Power Mediating Identity in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*.", cit., pp. 62-63.

[405] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 292.

[406] G. Law and A. Maunder, "Collins and Women", cit., p. 99.

The final words of Limping Lucy's violent condemnation of Franklin Blake, who is believed to be responsible for Rosanna Spearman's suicide, are: "Ha, Mr Betteredge, the day is not far off when the poor will rise against the rich. I pray Heaven they may begin with *him*".[407] This idea of a stronger political message in the novel becomes clearer when one realizes that, as Law and Maunder pointed out, the "happy ending" (i.e. the engagement of Rachel and Franklin Blake) relies on the sacrifice or self-sacrifice of many less fortunate women, who are victims of social inequality or persecution, and whose voices are silenced or ignored.[408] Rosanna Spearman, a working-class woman who is not considered attractive, is almost invisible to those in power. Franklin Blake does not care about her death, and her side of the story is only heard through the letter she wrote after she died. Even though it is not as clearly focused on women's roles as *No Name* or *Armadale*, *The Moonstone* still offers a chance for those interested in "male feminist voices" to take a closer look at these issues.[409] Collins's attempts to explore women's choices and restrictions once more generate numerous representations and reflections on patriarchy, while his own performance forces him to employ various narratorial disguises. Locating Collins's writing about women within the contexts of its production and reading remains a complex task. His novels support female intelligence and initiative, suggesting that female fulfilment and a sense of self are desirable;[410] indeed, in the novels, Female figures who are excessive and unruly are often disciplined by either marriage or violent death.

When Blake obeys Rosanna's orders and goes alone to the Shivering Sands, he discovers a hidden box containing a nightgown which bears a smear of paint, which is a crucial proof of the theft. Upon examining the gown more closely, he wrote: "I found the mark, and read – MY OWN NAME".[411] The decision to write "my own name" instead of "Franklin Blake", like it would have been on the nightgown, shows how much this discovery impacts the reader.[412] Rosanna's letter explains why she buried the nightgown in the sand. She wanted to hide it in a place where no one could find it unless she herself

[407] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 179.
[408] Law and A. Maunder, "Collins and Women", cit., p. 100.
[409] *Ibidem.*
[410] *Idem,* p. 99.
[411] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 300.
[412] S. Wildman, "Covert Female Power Mediating Identity in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*.", cit., p. 63.

chose to reveal the secret to them first. Rosanna knows that hiding the evidence in the Shivering Sands is the best way to keep it hidden. This ensures no one will find it and reveal it to the public unless she allows it. Therefore, Rosanna's reclamation of power is demonstrated by this deliberate act of concealing information. By concealing the evidence in the private space, she maintains control over the crucial piece of evidence. The only way Blake can understand his true identity is if she allows him to access this information privately.

In a similar way to Rosanna, Rachel is following the Victorian female tradition of keeping information private. After Blake finds the nightgown, he starts to understand the importance of women hiding information. He realizes that Rachel's silence is the key and that he needs to investigate further. Blake consistently points out that Rachel has declined to see him and instead opts to remain in the private sphere of her home, where society has established that she belongs. Rachel uses this to her advantage, knowing that because of social rules about separate spaces for men and women, Blake cannot force his way into her home and must respect her wishes. Once Rachel agrees to meet Blake privately, she confirms that she has been purposely hiding the truth, telling him directly: "I have kept your infamy a secret. And I have suffered the consequences of concealing it".[413] She recognizes the social expectations that have been put on her, stating: "I refrained from alarming the house, and telling everybody what had happened – as I ought to have done".[414] Rachel is a rich woman in Victorian society, and she knows that women of her class, especially, are expected to stay calm and controlled. That is why she keeps Blake's guilt a secret, even if it is not the right thing to do. Blake's identity is held in a state of limbo by this continuous resistance, which emphasises her continuing power as long as the evidence is unknown.[415] Rachel's observation of Blake's uncertain status prompts her to finally exclaim: "*You villain, I saw you take the Diamond with my own eyes!*".[416] By addressing Blake as a villain at this crucial moment and revealing the final piece of evidence, she completes the shift in his identity. Blake realizes that Rachel believes he is guilty because of what she saw with her own eyes. This deeply affects him, and from that moment, he begins to question everything, including his own sense of innocence. Now

[413] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 332.
[414] *Idem,* p. 340.
[415] S. Wildman, "Covert Female Power Mediating Identity in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*.", cit., p. 65.
[416] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 333.

that Rachel has shown Blake the final piece of evidence in the privacy of her home, he cannot ignore his guilt anymore. By revealing this important information, Rachel is able to confirm that Blake is the thief, showing that she has a quiet but strong influence over how he sees himself.

The true detective process requires the presence of Rachel and Rosanna, two important female characters in the text, in order to arrive at this conclusion. Both women follow the social norms of Victorian times, which mandate submission to the private realm.[417] In this private space, the women gain a hidden kind of power in the investigation by keeping important evidence to themselves. It is their silence that allows Blake to keep seeing himself as the hero, and it is only when they reveal the truth that he begins to see himself as the thief.[418] Although masculinity is typically the focus of detection, women in *The Moonstone* hold the power from the private sphere, displacing the presumed heroic power men hold in the public. These two women, though from different social classes, both have equal power over how the male characters see themselves. They gain this power by quietly going against the social rules meant to limit them, using their control of key information to influence the detective process.[419] This reversal of traditional feminine roles shows that women's knowledge drives the mystery forward. It creates a new view of women in nineteenth-century Britain, presenting them, regardless of class, as holding power, despite the social rules meant to restrict them.[420] This redefinition of female roles is mirrored in Collins's broader interest in other forms of marginality, such as disability, which he uses as another tool for social critique.

4.4 Collins and Disability: A Silent Revolution

Wilkie Collins's fiction frequently highlights individuals who face challenges in their relationship with the material world. The fact that he is interested in obstacles to full physical functioning may be due to his own issues with his eyesight - he complained of chronic "eye gout", and he sought treatment from ophthalmic surgeon George

[417] S. Wildman, "Covert Female Power Mediating Identity in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*.", cit., p. 65.
[418] *Ibidem.*
[419] *Idem,* p. 66.
[420] *Ibidem.*

Critchett.[421] While Collins is aware of the common ways disability is shown in stories, and sometimes uses these ideas, his portrayals of disabled characters often challenge the typical views of disability in mid-Victorian society. He rejects both the sad, pitying view of disability and the medical idea that disabled people are "broken" and need to be "fixed".[422] Collins's novelistic career is cantered around his efforts to expose the inaccuracies or prejudices of various ideologies or values related to bodies and minds, and to point out how they contribute to the discourse and stigma that affect disabled individuals.[423] Many of Collins's characters might seem different from social norms, but Kate Flint argues that he uses them not just to make the story more interesting, but also to encourage reflection on how the world is understood and to question what is believed to be true. Collins uses certain characters to blur the lines between able-bodied people and those with disabilities.[424] The hypersensitive Frederick Fairlie in *The Woman in White* is another example of this. He pretends to smell the "fingers of horrid dealers" and "brokers" on the drawings he shows to Walter Hartwright, who rightly does not sense an "odour of plebeian fingers"[425], but the much more unpleasant stench of class prejudice behind the remark.

Overall, Collins seems more interested in how disabled people are similar to the able-bodied, rather than how they are different.[426] Most characters are closer to the readers in terms of class, unlike the beggars in London. But there are exceptions, like Rosanna Spearman in *The Moonstone*, a maid with a deformed shoulder, and her friend, Limping Lucy, the fisherman's daughter, who has a misshapen foot. Collins gives readers plenty of opportunities to think about how we use our senses in everyday life, especially by focusing on the language of sensory perception – both literal and metaphorical – throughout his writing. In my opinion, it appears that the prose of individual narrators becomes hyper-conscious of their own sensory powers when they encounter those with deficient physical senses.

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[421] K. Flint, "Disability and Difference", in J. B. Taylor, (ed.), *The Cambridge to Wilkie Collins,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 153-167, p. 153.
[422] H. Logan, "Wilkie Collins and Disabled Identities", in *Sensational Deviance: Disability in Nineteenth-Century Sensation Fiction,* London, Routledge, 2020, pp. 25-155, p. 25.
[423] *Idem,* p. 26.
[424] K. Flint, "Disability and Difference", cit., p. 154.
[425] W. Collins, *The Woman in White,* cit., 42.
[426] K. Flint, "Disability and Difference", cit., p. 154.

Collins's fiction lacks a clear distinction between "abnormal" and "normal".[427] To engage the readers and make them care about both the emotions of the disabled and those who care passionately – not compassionately – for them, strong affective plots are employed. By evoking the conditions of disability, able-bodied readers can reflect on their own senses, deficiencies, and abilities. Collins rejects the type of distancing and categorization found in traditional taxonomies of the "bodily afflicted" when he enters the world of the differently-abled.[428] Collins ultimately advises readers to maintain a cautious scepticism of the grounds on which assumptions about differences, in general, can be used to form social thinking.[429]

In Wilkie Collins's novel *The Moonstone*, the abnormal body is repeatedly represented. The work is considered a key story in the crime and detective genre, and it can also be seen as part of the popular group of sensation novels that dominated the Victorian literary world in the mid- to late nineteenth century.[430] I argue that the way abnormality is shown in *The Moonstone* reflects a disabled perspective on how Victorian culture worked. Collins's writing in this 1868 story often contrasts images of the abnormal body (usually female, poor, and impaired) with images of the normal body (usually male, privileged, and able). Throughout the nineteenth century, as Mossman argues, in both the body's evolution and its changes through theory and institutional practices, "the impaired body became disabled" and "the disabled body became 'abnormal'".[431] The category of disability starts to emerge within these conflicting ideas about what makes a body normal or abnormal, shaped by the ongoing discussions in nineteenth-century mathematics, science, and medicine, and the cultural fascination with this same divide.[432] When interacting with differences, the abnormal body is often readily a symbol of larger social issues, anxieties, and problems, and, as a disability studies framework suggests, it can be easily incorporated into a larger articulation of normative ideology.

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[427] *Idem,* p. 165.
[428] *Idem,* p. 166.
[429] *Ibidem.*
[430] See H. Logan, "Wilkie Collins and Disabled Identities", cit., 28-29.
[431] M. Mossman, "Representations of the Abnormal Body in *The Moonstone*", cit., p. 485.
[432] *Ibidem.*

The disabled body is transformed into the abnormal body in Collins's work. In a story like *The Moonstone*, the disabled body acts as a breaking point, placed at key moments of modern life – when the normal body directly contrasts with the abnormal body. The Moonstone moves the representations of the abnormal beyond the established formal devices of the sensation and detective genres to a more advanced critical and cultural framework.[433] I assert that in every encounter between the normal subject and the abnormal or deviant subject, the dynamic of disruption is articulated and reinforced. This power over another is displayed in the visual field, body perception, and stare moment. When a body with normalcy is able to define, classify, and exclude an impaired or different body, it is demonstrating its power over another. The appearance of normalcy comes with an inherent violence that is the foundation of the normal/abnormal encounter: Like Franklin Blake in *The Moonstone*, who looks at someone with a deformity like Rosanna Spearman, it is a moment of forced submission. Disability is seen as something negative and abnormal, where the body, wild and out of control, is defined, managed, and controlled.[434] Rosanna Spearman is first described by Gabriel Betteredge in the following way:

> I hardly know what the girl did to offend them. There was certainly no beauty about her to make the others envious; she was the plainest woman in the house, with the additional misfortune of having one shoulder bigger than the other.[435]

Rosanna's identity is based on her "additional misfortune". In his narrative, Betteredge will continue to use physical descriptions, describing Rosanna as a "deformed"[436] and "ugly" body, making her most often pitied. The reader is told by Betteredge that Rosanna must be pitied because she is physically different, and pathetically so. She is a female, poor, alone, and, most importantly, deformed. In normalized nineteenth-century English society, the way Betteredge treats Rosanna shows how surface-level bodily differences

[433] *Ibidem.*
[434] *Idem,* p. 487.
[435] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 21.
[436] *Idem,* p. 23.

are understood and stereotyped.[437] Rosanna's definition is largely based on her exterior physical differences (such as her deformed shoulder, which must be concealed), and her obvious deviation from the norm, which disrupts the normalized perceptual field. The pathos of her first appearance, the sympathy that Betteredge feels when he describes Rosanna sitting by the sea in her little straw bonnet, highlights the negative way her body is seen as abnormal. She is a woman with "misfortune", a woman with "no beauty", a woman who is "alone", and a woman with a "deformity".[438] Rosanna is "deformed" both physically and mentally; her inner self is closely tied to her outer appearance, to the disability and abnormality of her body. At first, Blake does not notice Rosanna. Eventually, she is replaced in the story by a letter buried deep in the Shivering Sand.
In Franklin Blake's narrative, Limping Lucy, like Rosanna, is also identified – literally named – by her bodily differences. Blake describes Lucy in the following terms:

> A wan, wild, haggard girl, with remarkably beautiful hair, and with a fierce keenness in her eyes, came limping up on a crutch to the table at which I was sitting, and looked at me as if I was an object of mingled interest and horror, which it quite fascinated her to see […] My attention was absorbed in following the sound of the girl's crutch. Thump-thump, up the wooden stairs; thump-thump across the room above our heads; thump-thump down the stairs again—and there stood the apparition at the open door, with a letter in its hand, beckoning me out![439]

Like Rosanna, Lucy's body is a symbol of disruption, a sudden perturbation to the conventional perceptual field in Victorian culture and society. The exterior difference of Lucy, like Rosanna, determines and defines her inner self, or supposedly concealed person. Blake is initially fascinated and overwhelmed by Lucy's arrival and first appearance. She does not seem like a person, but more like a ghostly figure holding a letter, calling him out. The rest of the scene shows how the norm manages and incorporates disruptions like Lucy's differences. Blake (and Betteredge) defines Lucy by

[437] M. Mossman, "Representations of the Abnormal Body in *The Moonstone*", cit., p. 489.
[438] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 21-23.
[439] *Idem,* p. 294.

both her outward appearance and her inner "madness". Just like with Rosanna's past, the connection between her external and internal state is quickly made. Blake's gaze and his focus on her body's surface link her limp and its sound directly to her inner self, defining her completely.[440] Both Betteredge and Blake place Rosanna and Lucy on the edges of society because of their physical differences. Blake finishes by giving his own explanation of what happened and what Limping Lucy really is: "I could only suppose that she was mad".[441] Blake, as someone who is "normal", is speaking in support of the norm and other normalized readers/bodies in his assessment of this text and this body.

Both Rosanna and Lucy have a desire for freedom and a way of imagining a different life. In her conversation with Blake, for example, Lucy imagines living with Rosanna in London, like sisters, in a shared solidarity that rejects the conventional male-dominated society. Both Lucy and Rosanna are excluded from this society because of their physical differences. Lucy's vision of living together with Rosanna represents an idea of independence and freedom – one where the body and self are not defined by society's norms, but by a fellow woman, someone who understands the same struggles. In this vision, Lucy rejects being seen as an insignificant or "mad" person because of her disability. She imagines a world where her body and identity could be legitimate, and where disability could be recognized as a valid perspective in society.[442] Lucy is not "mad" or the foolish, frustrated character Blake thinks she is. Instead, she is given a voice in the novel, supported by an important letter. Lucy tells Blake plainly that she has looked at him and never wants to again. She has returned his gaze; she has looked back, and in doing so, she rejects him. The cultural system that marginalizes people like Limping Lucy, and the controlling gaze of normalcy from Franklin Blake, Betteredge, and many Victorian readers, is challenged through Lucy, Rosanna's letter, and later through Ezra Jennings proving Blake's innocence and the image of the Shivering Sand, which helps define the whole novel.[443]

It is impossible for Lucy and Rosanna to participate in normative culture. Both are profoundly excluded from the normative centre. It is not surprising that Rosanna kills herself, and the last image of Limping Lucy is of her limping away from the shocked

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[440] M. Mossman, "Representations of the Abnormal Body in *The Moonstone*", cit., p. 489.
[441] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 295.
[442] See H. Logan, "Wilkie Collins and Disabled Identities", cit., p. 30
[443] M. Mossman, "Representations of the Abnormal Body in *The Moonstone*", cit., p. 490.

Franklin Blake, disappearing into the attic. The novel highlights a growing perspective on culture from the viewpoint of disability. In *The Moonstone*, Collins creates an alternative to the world of oppressive norms represented by Blake and Betteredge.

While Lucy and Rosanna have bodies that are unmistakably "deformed", Ezra's body, though not visibly deformed, is still strange, unusual, and thought-provoking:

> The door opened, […] and a remarkable-looking man entered. Judging by his figure and movements, he was still young, […] but his face made him seem older than Betteredge. His complexion of a gipsy darkness, his fleshless cheeks had fallen into deep hollows, over which the bone projected like a pent-house. His nose had the fine shape common among Eastern people. His nose presented the fine shape and modelling so often found among the ancient people of the East, so seldom visible among the newer races of the West. His forehead rose high and straight from the brow. His marks and wrinkles were innumerable. From this strange face, eyes, stranger still, of the softest brown—eyes dreamy and mournful, and deeply sunk in their orbits—looked out at you, and (in my case, at least) took your attention captive at their will. Add to this a quantity of thick closely-curling hair, which, by some freak of Nature, had lost its colour in the most startlingly partial and capricious manner. Over the top of his head it was still of the deep black which was its natural colour. Round the sides of his head—without the slightest gradation of grey to break the force of the extraordinary contrast—it had turned completely white. The line between the two colours preserved no sort of regularity.[444]

Once again, Jennings shows the stereotype of physical difference, but at the same time, this stereotype is also being questioned. For example, Betteredge and Mr. Bruff (the family lawyer) see Jennings as different, strange, and unusual, so they suspect him and think he's probably guilty of something.[445] When Jennings first appears, Betteredge tells Franklin Blake that Jennings looks suspicious and that no one likes him. Unlike Lucy and

[444] W. Collins, *The Moonstone,* cit., p. 312.
[445] M. Mossman, "Representations of the Abnormal Body in *The Moonstone*", cit., p. 92.

Rosanna, whom Blake can easily dismiss due to their physical differences, he feels a sense of sympathy for Ezra Jennings. Ezra Jennings is portrayed as someone of mixed race and as an opium addict, using an exotic drug. Because of his questionable heritage and physical dependence on a foreign substance, the Victorian readers are led to see him as a moral monster. Like his outward physical differences, it is suggested that his inner self is also disordered, chaotic, and morally corrupted.

In all these relationships, Blake stays in a position of power. He is always able to define and control the meaning of the other characters and the situation. Blake's fascination and sympathy make Jennings the hero of the story, the one who saves Franklin Blake, and the best detective, even better than Sergeant Cuff. Collins transcends the boundaries of normal and abnormal by introducing characters such as Ezra Jennings into Victorian society. Rosanna and Lucy are the two main characters in his text, and then Ezra is the unlikely hero. The hero is the opium addict, Ezra Jennings, while the villain is Godfrey Ablewhite (who is, of course, "able" and "white"), who appears respectable but is later found dead in disguised. The narrative becomes a critical prothesis that complements the original toxic past, transforms reality, and rewrites social categories and the categories of physical difference.[446] The complexity of these novels is achieved by exploring how the identification of disability or situations of disability are frequently linked to issues of gender, class, race, and reproduction.[447] Many of Wilkie Collins's novels feature disabled characters, exploring a variety of physical and mental disabilities.

In the works of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins, Victorian norms are constantly questioned, showing not only the limits society places on people but also the conflicts that arise when those limits are challenged. Both authors, in their own ways, criticize social issues, questioning the roles of women, strict moral codes, and society's view of disability. By doing this, they create stories that encourage readers to rethink ideas about normality, identity, and morality in a changing world. What makes Collins and Braddon stand out is how they weave social critique into popular genres. Through sensation fiction, both authors address issues that are often ignored, such as mental illness, women's roles in society, and the stigma around disability. Their novels are not just suspenseful mysteries, but also deep looks into human nature, power, and the social forces

[446] *Idem,* p. 494.
[447] H. Logan, "Wilkie Collins and Disabled Identities", cit., p. 25.

that shape people's lives. The works of Braddon and Collins challenge Victorian norms, urging readers to question the moral and social rules of their time. They encourage us to look deeper into their stories and understand how their characters are shaped and limited by society's expectations. By exploring their struggles, it is possible to see that it is not just the characters who are out of place, but the system itself that tries to define them. To conclude, *Intrigue and Dissent* are not only key themes in the works of Braddon and Collins, but also important parts of what makes their writing memorable. Through complex characters, surprising plot twists, and bold social criticism, they revealed the hidden tensions of Victorian society. Their stories do not just question the rules of their time – they still make us think today about identity, morality, and power.

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